

Report to the Twelve Districts

May 2024

WISCONSIN EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN SYNOD
Waukesha, Wisconsin

Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
N16W23377 Stone Ridge Drive, Waukesha WI 53188-1108
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Published 2024
Printed in the United States of America

Foreword

“Not to us, LORD, not to us but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness” (Psalm 115:1).

With those words, the psalm writer joyfully confessed that everything we have, every success we enjoy, everything that we have accomplished, is ours not because of our own talents, skills, dedication, or wisdom. Everything we have and are comes to us because of the love and faithfulness of our gracious God. For that, we give him thanks and praise.

These are important words to remember as we gather for our district conventions. We will look back on what the faithful called workers and lay members of our congregations have done, and we will see many good things that have been accomplished. And we will look ahead to the opportunities and challenges that are waiting for us in the days ahead. For what has been done in the past and for what we will do in the future, we take no credit for ourselves. Everything done in the past and everything that will be done in the future is made possible only by the love and faithfulness of a gracious God who blesses the work of our hands and who works through the power of his Word and promises.

Our synod is comprised of people who have two things in common. We are sinners who deserve nothing from God except for his eternal punishment. Our worship is sometimes half-hearted and distracted. Our zeal and commitment to doing God’s work are inconsistent. Our efforts are flawed and often fall short. But we are also people who, by God’s grace, are redeemed and forgiven because of the love and faithfulness of a gracious God. We are his people. He has made us members of his family. He has built us like living stones into his church.

Certainly none of us would make the claim that our synod is perfect. The evidence is clear every day that it is not. And it will not be perfect this side of heaven. At the same time, there is much for which to be thankful.

God has continued to enable our synod to stand firmly on his Word and to remain faithful to the biblical doctrines that he has revealed to us in Scripture. He has kindled in us the commitment to remain faithful to the Lutheran Confessions, which are faithful summaries of biblical truth. He has led us to recognize the importance of insisting on well-trained pastors, teachers, and staff ministers and has sent many workers into his harvest field. He has helped us to look beyond the ministry of our local congregations and to work together to increase the number of new home mission starts and to seize the growing opportunities for gospel proclamation around the world. In a culture that is growing ever more hostile to God and his people, he has given us the perfect message that can prevail and that alone can change the hearts of people and bring them into his family of believers.

At your district convention, you will hear about the past work and future plans of those whom you entrust to carry out the synod’s work. They will tell you about efforts that succeeded and about others that fell short of expectations. They will also share with you plans for the future and the results they hope to achieve. As they present these things and as we join together to support all of those efforts, we will remember the words of the psalm writer: “Not to us, LORD, not to us but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness.”

Rev. Mark Schroeder, WELS president

Organizational chart

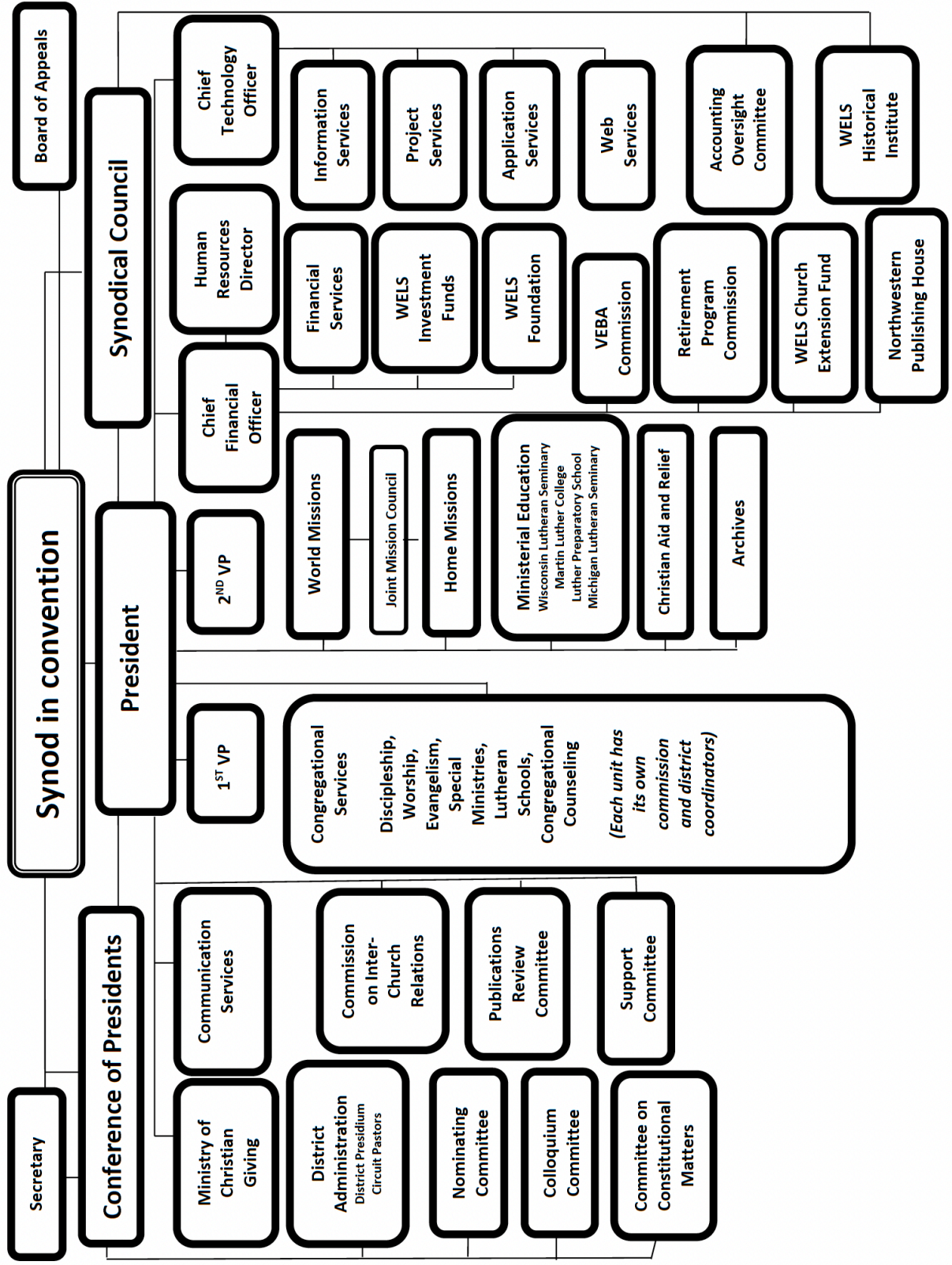


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For more information, visit welsconvention.net/rtd.

Congregation and District Ministry

The Congregation and District Ministry portion of WELS' ministry financial plan (budget) includes the Conference of Presidents (COP) and all entities overseen by the COP. These include:

Conference of Presidents

- Regular and special meetings of the Conference of Presidents and the Assignment Committee
- Travel and other expenses related to the district presidents' work
- Pastoral assistants provided to the congregations served by the district presidents
- Partial cost of the vicar program

Support Committee

Grants and assistance provided to needy retired called workers and their spouses

Commission on Inter-Church Relations

- Regular and special meetings of the commission
- Travel expenses related to inter-church relations
- Annual support for the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference (CELC)
- Financial support for sister church bodies as appropriate

Ministry of Christian Giving

- Administration and staff salaries and office expenses
- Salaries and travel expenses for current and deferred Christian giving counselors
- Expenses of counselor training and consultation
- Cost of promotions and appeals

Communication Services

- Content production and management of WELS' web presence, including wels.net and social media outlets
- Graphic design, editorial, and video production services to create WELS communication pieces and to assist all areas of ministry, subsidiaries, and one affiliate with their communications
- Coordination of public responses and communications of the synod
- Funding for editorial staff of *Forward in Christ*

Synod Nominating Committee

Selection of nominees for convention elections

Congregational Services

- Commission on Worship
- Commission on Evangelism
- Commission on Special Ministries
- Commission on Lutheran Schools
- Commission on Discipleship
- Commission on Congregational Counseling

Continuing Education for Called Workers Committee

Coordination of efforts to help called workers grow in faith, knowledge, and skill

Translation Liaison Committee

Evaluation of major Bible translations and communication with their editors and publishers, including suggestions for improvements to translations

Synod convention

District ministries and functions

- Costs related to the functions of the districts, district presidia, and circuit pastors
- District conventions and other meetings
- District committees

Conference of Presidents

The Conference of Presidents (COP) is composed of the 12 district presidents, elected by their respective districts, as well as the synod president and the two synod vice presidents, all of whom are elected by the synod in convention. The synod president serves as the chairman of the Conference of Presidents. The synod secretary, also elected by the synod in convention, serves as a non-voting advisory member of the Conference of Presidents.

The Conference of Presidents meets in person three times annually for regular meetings and monthly between meetings via teleconference. The Conference of Presidents also meets twice in May each year in its role as the Assignment Committee of the synod.

The Conference of Presidents is entrusted with the following broad responsibilities:

- Supervising, maintaining, and strengthening biblical doctrine and practice.
- Overseeing the calling process by providing calling bodies with call lists for pastors, teachers, and staff ministers as well as counsel and advice pertaining to the divine call.
- Serving as the Assignment Committee to assign graduates of Martin Luther College and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary to their first calls into the public ministry.
- Working with congregations, often through circuit pastors, to care and provide for the physical and spiritual needs of called workers and their families and to help address issues between congregations and their called workers.
- Encouraging congregations and individuals in their financial support of the synod, primarily through Congregation Mission Offerings.
- Overseeing the work of the Ministry of Christian Giving, Communication Services, and Congregational Services.
- Promoting the synod's mission and ministry in the districts.
- Promoting the general welfare of the synod.
- Providing counsel to the synod president as he carries out his responsibilities.

The Conference of Presidents is divided into three standing committees: the Doctrine Committee, the Congregations Committee, and the Called Worker Committee. Matters for discussion and action are assigned to one of these three committees, and the committees forward reports and recommendations to the entire COP for action.

The Conference of Presidents spends significant time at each meeting discussing specific questions of doctrine and practice and issues formal statements and guidelines in these areas as needed. The COP also addresses practical issues that affect congregations and called workers. The group functions primarily as a "conference," with district presidents and the synod presidium conferring with each other, both seeking and offering advice for the good of the synod and its people.

Doctrinal statements and pastoral briefs

The Conference of Presidents has also been working for several years to formulate a restatement of the synod's doctrinal statement on the roles of men and women. After discussing and reviewing several drafts of a restatement, the COP concluded that this matter would better be addressed through a pastoral brief that will be prepared by the COP. Such a brief would provide a better opportunity not only to affirm the doctrinal principles involved but also to provide guidance on how this doctrine is applied. The pastoral brief will be made available as soon as it is completed. The COP also plans to provide principles that can guide congregations as they craft bylaws that reflect biblical doctrine. Several "model" constitutions will also be provided for congregations that are considering bylaw changes.

Here is the communication that was shared with all called workers:

Dear Co-workers,

Several years ago, the Conference of Presidents decided to address questions and misunderstandings related to the synod's current doctrinal statement on the roles of men and women. At that time, it began work on crafting a restatement of the doctrinal statement.

As it began its work, the COP agreed that the restatement would not in any way change the synod's doctrinal position on the biblical principles involved but would instead address current issues relating to the application of the doctrine and would attempt to clarify areas of the doctrinal statement that were open to misunderstanding, misapplication, or overstatement. The original plan was to present the restatement to the synod in convention for adoption as an official doctrinal statement of WELS.

After several years of crafting the restatement (and several revisions), discussing it, and wrestling with various aspects of the issue, the COP has concluded that the matters in question would better be addressed by a pastoral brief rather than by a new doctrinal statement. The plan is that the pastoral brief will be released as soon as it is completed by the COP.

Hymnal adoption

The COP was informed that the new hymnal has been adopted by approximately 75 percent of WELS congregations. The percentage continues to grow, and it represents a "higher than estimated" percentage at this point in time.

Long-range plan

The COP recognizes that it is the responsibility of the Synodical Council to develop a long-range plan for the synod's mission and ministry. The COP encouraged the Synodical Council to begin development of a new plan to guide the synod's mission and ministry for the next ten years. The Synodical Council has appointed a committee, chaired by Jonathan Hein, to develop the plan and to present it to the synod convention in 2025. See p. 43 for more details.

Statistics and Congregation Mission Offering subscriptions

The percentage of WELS congregations that submitted 2023 statistics to the synod stands at 96.7 percent. Congregations that did not report statistics will be contacted for the information. The percentage of WELS congregations that submitted Congregation Mission Offering (CMO) subscriptions for 2024 is 99 percent. The COP is thankful to all the congregations that submitted statistics and CMO subscriptions.

In 2023, WELS congregations provided the highest level of Congregation Mission Offerings in our synod's history. We thank our members for their generous gifts of faith, and we thank the Lord of the Church for motivating his people to support our synod's mission and ministry so generously.

COP Doctrine Committee and the Doctrine Committee of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod

The COP Doctrine Committee meets annually with the Doctrine Committee of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod to discuss doctrinal issues and other subjects of mutual interest.

Development of a new K-12 religion curriculum

The development of a new theology curriculum for K-12 students has begun. The COP asked the Commission on Lutheran Schools to form a task force to oversee this work. The COP called Melanie Giddings to work with the task force as the coordinator of this project.

Funding for capital projects

The COP was informed that the Synodical Council is open to the idea of borrowing for capital projects as long as the borrowing is done wisely and with a clear mechanism to service the debt. The COP concurred that the wise use of borrowing could be a significant factor in enabling needed capital projects at our synodical schools and entrusted the Synodical Council to continue discussing the circumstances in which borrowing could take place.

Convention evaluation

In general, delegate feedback from the convention was very positive. There were mixed reactions to the electronic system that was used by delegates to cast votes. A number of delegates did not have their votes counted because of difficulties with hardware and connectivity. The COP will reconsider the benefits of using an electronic method of voting. One question was whether it is necessary for all advisory delegates to attend a convention. The consensus

of the COP was that attendance by advisory delegates is beneficial to them and to the delegates who have an opportunity to interact with them.

Proposal to change from a biennial synod convention to a triennial convention

A proposal to consider a triennial convention rather than the biennial convention was not introduced to the 2023 synod convention because districts had not had a chance to review and evaluate the benefits and drawbacks of such a change.

While not taking a position on this proposal, the Conference of Presidents determined that the proposal should be discussed at the district conventions this summer and that the conventions provide reaction and input. Depending on district convention reactions, the proposal could be placed before the 2025 convention for initial discussion. If the 2025 convention is in favor of the change, it would be forwarded in its final form to the district conventions in 2026 and forwarded to the 2027 synod convention for final action. If the proposal is passed and the constitution and bylaws are amended, the next convention would be held in 2030.

The proposal itself, with additional rationale, can be found on p. 6 as Appendix 1 of this report.

Communion at the WELS International Youth Rally

The COP was asked to react to the possibility of celebrating the Lord's Supper at the WELS International Youth Rally. The COP reacted positively to the idea but advised that instruction regarding closed communion be given in advance.

Early Childhood Ministry Task Force

A task force has been working to provide guidance and assistance to early childhood ministries. One topic that the task force has been discussing is the unique set of circumstances year-round early childhood ministries face when it comes to staffing, vacation time, and compensation. The task force is considering measures that will be beneficial to the Commission on Lutheran Schools and the COP as they assist these ministries by developing call lists and making assignments. The COP has asked the Compensation Review Committee of the Synodical Council to propose appropriate levels of compensation for directors and teachers who serve in year-round capacities.

Ministry Recruitment Task Force

The Ministry Recruitment Task Force was formed as a result of a 2023 synod convention resolution. The task force has been functioning under the chairmanship of Paul Prange, Board for Ministerial Education administrator. A progress report is included as an appendix to the report of the Board for Ministerial Education on p. 81.

Calls issued

Bryan Gerlach, director of WELS Commission on Worship, has announced his retirement in the summer of 2024. Upon the recommendation of the Commission on Worship, the Conference of Presidents called Paul Prange as the interim director of the Commission on Worship. Prange accepted the call and will serve as the interim director until December 2024. His part-time service will enable WELS Congregational Services and Commission on Worship to determine how best to address the staffing needs of the commission as it provides resources and assistance to WELS congregations in the area of worship.

Michael Hatzung has announced his retirement from full-time service as a Christian giving counselor. The COP called Hatzung to serve in this capacity on a part-time basis. He has accepted the call.

The COP also called Ralph LePore to serve as a Christian giving counselor, and he has also accepted that call.

At its April meeting, the COP issued a divine call to Ryan Busman to serve as a Christian giving counselor to serve in the Western Wisconsin District. Another call was issued to Nathan Cordes to serve in the south of the Minnesota District, Nebraska District, and Dakota-Montana District.

The COP extended a call to Melanie Giddings to serve full time as curriculum coordinator of the Commission on Lutheran Schools. She has been serving on a half-time basis as part of the task force developing a new K-12 religion curriculum for the synod. She accepted this call, and her position becomes full time as of July 1.

Merging and closing congregations

From time to time, WELS congregation respond to changing ministry situations by deciding to close or to merge. This process takes careful planning in practical and legal issues. The COP will be making guidelines available to assist congregations in this process.

New Teacher Induction Program and Pastor Partners Program

Martin Luther College and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary carry out programs to help new teachers and pastors as they begin their ministries. Congregations pay the cost of these programs, which is currently \$1,000 per year for three years. To more completely cover the cost, congregations will now be asked to provide \$1,500 annually for new pastors and teachers in these programs beginning with the 2025 calling season.

COP liaison to the Institute for Lutheran Apologetics

The COP asked Jon Buchholz, Arizona-California District president, to continue to serve as the COP liaison on the Institute for Lutheran Apologetics. Buchholz had been serving as the COP representative, but because he will no longer serve on the Conference of Presidents, he will now be the liaison for the COP.

Election procedures for synod officers

The COP is considering a recommendation to the 2025 synod convention that would change the procedure for the election of the synod president, vice presidents, and secretary. Currently, at the start of the convention delegates are asked to nominate one person for the position being filled, with the top five nominees comprising the ballot. Delegates have only a short time to review the nominees and their biographies. Delegates then vote for one of the five, and the voting continues until one person receives the majority of votes cast. Once a person is elected, he is expected to make a decision to accept or decline the call within 24 hours. This process requires a very quick decision and does not provide time for a person to give consideration to the call or to consult with others about it.

The COP will be introducing a change that would request nominations from delegates well in advance of the convention. Once the ballot is formed, the ballot would be sent to all delegates no later than two weeks prior to the convention. Those whose names are on the ballot, while not yet holding a call, would at least have the time to consider a possible call to serve and to discuss the possibility with family and other trusted advisors. The actual election would still take place at the convention.

This recommendation would go before the 2025 convention as a suggested bylaw change. A change would require a two-thirds majority and would be put into effect at the 2027 convention.

Vacancies

As of the April meeting of the COP, there were 175 pastoral vacancies in the synod, with 157 of those being parish pastor positions. With a 2024 seminary graduating class having 27 candidates for assignment, the vacancy situation will not improve in the near term. Larger classes at the seminary in the coming years, however, will begin to provide some relief. In the meantime, the COP asks every WELS congregation and member to encourage young men to consider training for the pastoral ministry.

A similar high vacancy rate is taking place in teacher positions. WELS school enrollments have increased significantly in the last two years—a real blessing—but that has caused a need for more teachers than are currently available. It's estimated that even after 200 teacher candidates are assigned at Martin Luther College in May, there will still be approximately 100 to 150 vacancies in teaching positions. The Commission on Lutheran Schools will be working with congregations to find ways to fill the vacancies for next school year. At the same time, Martin Luther College will be redoubling its efforts to recruit both traditional and non-traditional teacher candidates. It will also be exploring other ideas to provide more teacher candidates. As in the case of pastors, congregations, called workers, parents, and grandparents are in the best position to recruit and encourage young people for the teaching ministry.

175th anniversary of the synod

The synod will celebrate the 175th anniversary of its founding in 2025. The COP has appointed a committee, chaired by Joel Otto, to begin planning for the celebration. A summary of the committee's plans thus far can be found in Appendix 2 of this report on p. 12.

Thanks for faithful service

Jon Buchholz, president of the Arizona-California District, will be completing his service as district president as of the district convention in 2024. John Steinbrenner, president of the Pacific Northwest District, has accepted a call to another district and will also be completing his serve as district president as of the district convention in 2024. We thank God and these men for their faithful service and pray for God's continued blessing on their ministry.

Rev. Mark Schroeder, reporter

Rev. Mark Schroeder, WELS president and chairman

- Rev. James Huebner, WELS first vice president
- Rev. Joel Voss, WELS second vice president
- Rev. Jon Buchholz, Arizona-California District president
- Rev. Douglas Free, Dakota-Montana District president
- Rev. Philip Hirsch, Nebraska District president
- Rev. Michael Jensen, Western Wisconsin District president
- Rev. Dennis Klatt, Minnesota District president
- Rev. Daniel Leyrer, Southeastern Wisconsin District president
- Rev. Donald Patterson, South Central District president
- Rev. Michael Seifert, North Atlantic District president
- Rev. Snowden Sims, Michigan District president
- Rev. John Steinbrenner, Pacific Northwest District president
- Rev. Charles Westra, South Atlantic District president
- Rev. Joel Zank, Northern Wisconsin District president

Advisory:

- Rev. Robert Pasbrig, WELS secretary

Appendix 1: Triennial convention proposal

A proposal to change the synod convention from a biennial to a triennial convention has been received by the Conference of Presidents. The Conference of Presidents has not taken a position on this proposal, but it is requesting that the district conventions discuss it in 2024 and provide reaction. Details of the proposal, along with rationale and pros and cons, are found below.

Current challenges

Currently, some synod events occur every other year (i.e., a biennial rotation), such as synod and district conventions, the youth rally, etc. Other events occur once every three years (i.e., a triennial rotation), like WELS' various national conferences. These divergent schedules mean that in most years, multiple events are held in a short time frame in the second half of summer. As WELS Communications attempts to adequately promote multiple events, it must share an abundance of information, which WELS members must then absorb. Some will say this can lead to "communication overload," where people start to tune out communications. Additionally, for some congregations or individuals this overlap potentially creates financial and logistical challenges, i.e., if there are members who hope to attend multiple events in one summer.

Synod Events: Both Biennial & Triennial Rotation	2024 winter	2024 summer	2025 winter	2025 summer	2026 winter	2026 summer	2027 winter	2027 summer	2028 winter	2028 summer	2029 winter	2029 summer	2030 winter	2030 summer	2031 winter	2031 summer	2032 winter	2032 summer	2033 winter	2033 summer
Synod Convention			X				X				X				X					X
Youth Rally	X				X				X				X				X			
Worship Conference	X							X						X						X
Education Conference			X						X						X					
Leadership Conference					X						X						X			
Total Events in Year	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Total Events in Summer	2	2	1	2	2	1	2	2	1	2	2	1	2	2	1	2	1	2	1	2

Summer 2024 provides an example of the logistical challenges. WELS International Youth Rally will be held in late June. WELS National Conference on Worship, Music, and the Arts will be held late July. Both of those events have been planned with youth in mind. If a teen wants to attend both, can that teen or his family afford both? Can his congregation afford to subsize both? If the teen has a summer job, can he get time off both weeks?

These types of challenges led to discussion about the pros and cons of pivoting to a synodwide triennial rotation, which would eliminate events that overlap. Ancillary benefits include the potential to increase the opportunity for grassroots input from WELS members, more diverse opportunities for WELS youth, savings of time and money, etc.

The biennial rotation

Currently, WELS operates on a biennial rotation. In the first half of June of even number years, the 12 districts hold

various gatherings. There are district conventions where male called workers and lay representatives from each congregation meet to discuss *Report to the Twelve Districts* (RTTD). The focus of a district convention is largely on discussing synod and district business. District officials may be elected. Districts might pass memorials for consideration at the synod convention the following summer.

In early June of odd numbered years, districts might hold conferences where called workers and lay representatives discuss *Book of Reports and Memorials* (BORAM) for the synod convention that will be held later that summer. Ideally, the lay representatives at the district conference are the same men who will represent the district at the subsequent synod convention. (It might even be the same lay representatives who attended the previous summer's district convention, particularly if the district is passing along any resolutions to the synod in convention.) Those district conferences are also often used as a continuing education opportunity for called workers. Attendees may spend a few days in focused study for professional and spiritual growth.

WELS' Summers	
JUNE	JULY/AUGUST
District Events <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conventions • Conferences • District Youth Event 	Synod/National Events <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Synod convention • Ministry conferences • Youth rally

Currently, most synod events are held in the summer: synod convention, youth rally, worship conference, education conference, women's ministry conference. The exception is WELS National Conference on Lutheran Leadership, which is held in January once every three years. Some districts have a January district conference. When the leadership conference is held, it means those districts now must choose if they are going to cancel the district event or simply offer both options to the churches in their district—the national leadership conference and the district conference.

A triennial rotation

A triennial rotation would eliminate all overlap. There would never be multiple synod events in a short time frame but only one event per year, always held in the summer. Nor would there ever be overlap of national (synod) and district events.

TRIENNIAL ROTATION		
YEAR	EARLY SUMMER: DISTRICT EVENTS	LATE SUMMER: SYNOD/NATIONAL EVENTS
A	<i>District Conventions</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion of RTTD • Conduct district business • Anything else desired (e.g. spiritual growth) 	<i>WELS National Conference on Mission and Ministry</i>
B	<i>District Conferences</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anything the district hopes to accomplish called worker continued education, leadership development, etc. • Discussion of BORAM 	<i>Synod Convention</i>
C	<i>Whatever the District Wants</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This could be another professional growth conference. It could be a district youth event. Or the district may simply take a year off. 	<i>International Youth Rally</i> (Any other national niche events)

For this hypothetical triennial rotation, think in terms of Year A, B, and C. In the triennial rotation, the division of the summer remains the same: district events in the first half and synod events in the second half. Year A would be when a national ministry conference was held. Year B would be synod convention. Year C would be open for all other synod events, particularly the youth rally.

In all three years, districts schedule their events in June, just as currently is the case. District conventions would be held in Year A. They would discuss the synodical RTTD. In

Years B and C, districts could do whatever they want: another district convention, a district conference, a laymen's conference, a district youth event, a called worker continuing education event, etc. In Year B the delegates (both called worker and lay) who will be attending the synod convention later that summer would assemble in June, possibly in conjunction with whatever district event is held that summer. Those delegates would discuss BORAM and any responses or questions their district would want to convey to the synod in convention.

Triennial Rotation for Everything	2027 winter	2027 summer	2028 winter	2028 summer	2029 winter	2029 summer	2030 winter	2030 summer	2031 winter	2031 summer	2032 winter	2032 summer	2033 winter	2033 summer	2034 winter	2034 summer	2035 winter	2035 summer	2036 winter	2036 summer
	Mission & Ministry					X						X							X	
Synod Convention		X					X						X							X
Youth Rally			X						X						X					
Total Events in Year	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Total Events in Summer	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1

The impact of pivoting to a triennial rotation

On scheduling and communications

This pivot means that each year there will be only one large national synod event, always held in the second half of summer. WELS members never have to choose between national synod events. WELS Communications only has to promote and report on one national synod event annually, not two or three, avoiding “communication overload.” The movement of the national leadership conference to the summer means the winter months remain clear of any synod events, allowing the districts to plan whatever they want in that January time slot.

On elections to synodical positions

Elections of the synodical presidium—president, first vice president, second vice president, secretary—would be to three-year terms, with elections held each synod convention. Other elections (e.g., board chairmen) could either be to three-year terms held at each synod convention or to six-year terms held every other convention.

On grassroots influence

Does having a synod convention every three years instead of every two years adversely affect grassroots influence on the direction of the synod? A triennial rotation might actually increase that influence when it is needed. Consider:

DELEGATES AT CONVENTIONS		
	Synod	District
Total Delegates	c.a. 350	c.a. 3400
Called Worker Delegates	c.a. 175 (50%)	c.a. 2200 (65%)
Lay Delegates	c.a. 175 (50%)	c.a. 1200 (35%)
Churches Represented by Laity	c.a. 14%	c.a. 97%

The 2023 synod convention had 348 voting delegates. One hundred eighty-four were called workers (53 percent) and 164 were lay delegates (47 percent). Those 164 lay delegates represent about 13 percent of all WELS congregations. When the 12 districts meet, that brings together more than 3,400 called workers and lay members. More than a third of that group

is laity. Those 1,200 lay delegates represent almost every WELS congregation. When issues are discussed at district conventions, it involves ten times as many people as synod conventions, and almost every congregation is involved.

In a triennial rotation, if a district would so choose, it could have called worker and lay representatives meet in the two consecutive summers prior to a synod convention. This provides plenty of time for a district to do directed study on some topic (perhaps through an ad hoc group) and produce memorials for consideration by the synod in convention.

It should be noted that grassroots influence does not simply have to do with the frequency of district and synod conventions but also with whom the attendees are. While it is perhaps challenging to find delegates who can travel to multiple conventions, having some continuity in the lay delegates could be of strategic benefit. If the same laymen present for discussion at a district gathering are the lay representatives to the synod convention, it better ensures the lay delegates can accurately relay the thoughts of their district.

On synodical budgeting

In a triennial rotation, the synod in convention retains the responsibility of approving the synodical budget targets. That target simply encompasses three years, not two. The Synodical Council retains the responsibility to provide oversight of budgetary expenditures. So, in a sense, nothing changes. However, an administrative pivot would take place. Currently, areas of ministry work with the synod president and chief financial officer to plan two-year budgets. This requires forecasting expenses that are 18 to 30 months away. A triennial rotation would push budget projections out to a length where forecasting expenses is challenging to impossible. So, in a triennial rotation, synod convention would still set budget parameters for the three-year cycle. But synodical administrators would plan annual budgets that stayed within the parameters set by the synod in convention.

On needed crisis response

Those old enough will remember WELS’ budget crisis that occurred in the first decade of the 2000s. It forced quick and painful decisions. Would WELS be able to respond to such a crisis if a synod convention were held only once every three years?

It must be noted that the budget process has changed since that crisis. First, the creation of the Financial Stabilization Fund has safeguarded against the need for any rapid budgetary cuts. Second, budgeted expenditures of special funds are based entirely on monies already in hand, not on expected gift forecasts. Third, WELS hired a chief financial officer and expanded the financial support staff. With these improvements in place, budgeting has gone

very smoothly since that crisis. However, just as currently is the case, in the triennial system, an emergency synod convention could be convened if deemed necessary to address any sort of crisis, financial or otherwise.

On the financial and time cost of conventions

The cost of the travel, lodging, food, and materials for a synod convention average around \$75,000. Hidden costs include the aggregate hundreds of hours by dozens of individuals that go into preparing for the convention: the production of reports, assembly of BORAM, preparation of the convention site, etc. There is also very large aggregate cost of time for the 400-plus individuals who attend a synod convention. A triennial rotation obviously cuts that cost by one third.

On the district level any cost savings or increases would depend on what districts chose to do in Years B and C.

On the national ministry conferences

WELS Congregational Services holds three ministry conferences, all of which are held every three years.

- The WELS National Conference on Lutheran Leadership is held in January in Chicago, due to the centrality to WELS' largest districts and the lower cost direct flights available to outlying districts. The leadership conference's plenary sessions are used to discuss the larger strategic issues before congregations. The dozens of breakouts serve to model best ministry practices and hold focused panel discussions. The 2023 leadership conference had more than 1,300 attendees, evenly split between called workers and laity. A quarter of attendees were women. Approximately 100 of the attendees were high school students.
- The WELS National Conference on Worship, Music, and the Arts is held in late summer, generally on a college campus with a large chapel. The conference focus is obviously on worship and the arts; however some of the plenary sessions and many of the breakout sessions focus on the intersection of worship with other ministry objectives, e.g., the nexus between worship and evangelism, the intersection of worship and family ministry, etc. Various worship services are modeled. The worship conference typically has more than 1,000 attendees, including youth who are involved as choir members and instrumentalists.
- The WELS National Education Conference is held in the summer and moves to different locations. In plenary sessions, it focuses on the strategic issues before all levels of WELS educational ministries. Breakout sessions focus on best current practices in pedagogic, as well as professional, development. The education conference has approximately 500 individuals in attendance, the vast majority of whom are teachers.

On a triennial rotation, these would be combined into the WELS National Conference on Mission and Ministry. Different "tracks" would be offered. This would bring different audiences together. (While the leadership conference has a good number of teachers attend, it is nowhere close to the education conference.) A major emphasis would be tracks for youth, giving young WELS members an additional opportunity (beyond the youth rally) to discuss their role in the mission of the church. A permanent location would likely be established, probably the Baird Center in downtown Milwaukee. That has space with good acoustics for worship for up to approximately 5,000 attendees. Additional worship could be modeled at downtown congregations.

On opportunities for WELS youth

In the current biennial rotation, a young WELS member has the opportunity to attend three to four synod events during their high school years. However, it is possible that two of them might be in the same year, perhaps even in the same summer. In the triennial rotation, those young WELS members will have the opportunity to attend a synod event in three out of four years, always toward the end of summer, and never in the same year. The only "off" year would be for synod convention. (That would be an ideal year for a district to offer a district youth event, if feasible.)

On communications

A pivot to the triennial format saves the hundreds of hours that go into the production of BORAM or RTTD. However, it is not envisioned this would be a complete one-third savings, as WELS would still produce some sort of report every year. It might be a print report, like RTTD or BORAM. There is the possibility it could be a series of brief videos about WELS' various ministry efforts that could be shown to congregations over the course of the summer. The bottom line is there would still be some sort of report or communication provided to congregations in that "off" year (Year C in the hypothetical triennial model).

On impact to areas of ministry

There is support for the triennial rotation from WELS' areas of ministry. It will reduce the need of an area of ministry (e.g., Home Missions) to submit a budget plan modification to Synodical Council (who is charged with

managing the synodical budget between conventions) when an expense slides into a different fiscal year than previously planned. For WELS Congregation Services, the triennial rotation will simplify the planning and execution of national ministry conferences. It also simplifies everything from a communications perspective. WELS would no longer need to share information about different WELS efforts or gatherings in the same summer.

It should be emphasized that all areas of ministry are happy to serve the saints in WELS however seems best to them, in a biennial or triennial rotation.

Potential pros and cons of both approaches

<i>Biennial Rotation</i>	<i>Triennial Rotation</i>
<p>PROS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WELS historic norm; comfortable • Allows for a year-by-year back-and-forth between synod and districts • Provides more opportunities for called workers and laity who desire to participate at a synod convention 	<p>PROS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simple pattern to major events • Reduction of event conflict and possible event fatigue • If necessary, in additional district gatherings, allows for more members/congregations to be represented in discussion • Never any conflict with district events • One-third reduction in cost (both financial and time) of synod convention
<p>CONS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In some years, results in multiple major events occurring in a short period of time 	<p>CONS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Longer timespan for important synodical decisions (without convening a special convention)

Potential next steps

If district delegates see merits in having more discussion about this, they should consult Article XI of WELS' Constitution, which lays out the process for amending bylaws and the constitution. Per Article XI: Amendments to the Constitution and Bylaws, the following steps would need to take place:

1. An amendment (such as the example below) would need to be presented in writing at least 60 days prior to the 2025 synod convention. The synod in convention would review the proposed amendment and, if they see potential merit, refer it to the districts.
2. At the 2026 district conventions, the resolution would be studied and discussed. District conventions could then pass along any recommendations.
3. At the 2027 synod convention, the resolution, along with any district recommendations, would be reviewed and submitted to the synod in convention for final action. If three-fourths of the votes cast are affirmative, the amendment would be adopted.

RESOLUTION: PIVOTING TO A SYNOD TRIENNIAL SCHEDULE

- WHEREAS 1) WELS currently has some major events that run on a biennial rotation (i.e., every other year) and others that run on a triennial rotation (i.e., every three years); and
- WHEREAS 2) in most years this creates overlap, with multiple major events occurring in a short time period; and
- WHEREAS 3) that overlap can create logistical and financial challenges to individuals or congregations who wish to attend all those WELS events, as well as communication challenges for WELS, which must attempt to promote and share information about multiple events; and
- WHEREAS 4) when districts gather in convention to discuss synod business, there are nine times more total delegates and seven times more lay delegates than at a synod convention, meaning there is more grassroots discussion in the aggregate of district conventions than at synod convention; and

- WHEREAS 5) Article VIII, Section 5 of the synod constitution allows “special conventions of the synod” to be called if it is believed that the regular schedule is not sufficient to address some concern or need; therefore be it
- Resolved. a) that WELS pivot to a triennial rotation for major events: the synod convention being held in one year, any national conference(s) being held in another year, and national youth events being held in another year; and be it further
- Resolved. b) that the WELS constitution, Article VIII, Section 1 be amended to read: “The synod shall convene every three years as a delegate synod. Districts shall meet the year prior to a synod convention. Districts may also choose to meet in the year after a synod convention”; and be it further
- Resolved. c) that the bylaws of the WELS Constitution that reference officers serving four-year terms—Section 2.00(b), Section 2.10(b), Section 2.20(b), Section 2.40(a), Section 2.7(b)—be amended to reference three-year terms (to then be filled in each synod convention within the triennial rotation); and be it further
- Resolved. d) that the bylaws of the WELS Constitution, Section 3.00(a) be amended to read, “Regular conventions of the synod as described in the constitution shall be held the year prior to any year evenly divisible by three. Conventions shall be scheduled during the last full week in July”; and be it further
- Resolved. e) that bylaws of the WELS Constitution that reference various synod representatives, committee members, and chairmen serving four-year terms and being allowed to succeed themselves twice (for a total of 12 years) be amended to state these individuals shall serve three-year terms with individuals being allowed to succeed themselves three times (for a total of 12 years). (This includes Section 4.10(b), Section 4.15(e), Section 4.40(b), Section 4.50(b), Section 4.70(a), Section 5.00(a), Section 5.35(c), Section 6.00(c), Section 6.04(d), Section 6.16(c,d,j), Section 6.32(b,d), Section 6.34(b), Section 6.36(b), Section 6.38(b), Section 6.6.92(c), Section 7.00(b), Section 7.40(v), Section 7.50(b), Section 8.10(a), Section 8.30(a)); and be it finally
- Resolved. f) that corresponding changes be made to district constitutions and bylaws.

Note: If the above is considered at the 2025 synod convention, the following resolution could be passed in 2025 to provide clarity to the elections scheduled to be held in 2027.

RESOLUTION

- WHEREAS 1) the 2025 synod in convention decided to pass along a resolution to the 2026 district conventions that calls for a pivot to a triennial rotation of conventions; and
- WHEREAS 2) if that resolution is adopted by the 2027 synod in convention, it will amend the synod constitution and bylaws so that synod officers and other synod representatives will serve three-year terms; therefore be it
- Resolved. a) that it be communicated to anyone nominated for an election to be held at the 2027 synod convention that, if they are elected, the duration of their term shall be determined by whether or not the triennial resolution passes; and be it finally
- Resolved. b) that if that triennial rotation resolution passes, any synod officer and other synodical representatives elected to a four-year term at the 2025 synod convention be asked to serve a five-year term (i.e. through 2030), with the understanding that they may still succeed themselves as many times as they were eligible when elected in 2025.

Appendix 2: Report of the WELS 175th Anniversary Planning Committee

The committee appointed to organize the celebration of the 175th anniversary of the Wisconsin Synod in 2025 began meeting in February 2023. The theme “Christ through us” was chosen to coordinate with the ten-year plan that will be introduced at the 2025 synod convention. A logo that is distinct for the anniversary has been created. The 2025 convention will serve as the primary celebration of the anniversary. The committee envisions the opening service focusing on the blessings God has granted to and through WELS for 175 years. Congregations will be encouraged to celebrate the anniversary and focus on the ten-year plan over three Sundays in October 2025. October 13 will focus on the synod anniversary, October 20 will revolve around the ten-year plan, and October 27 is Reformation Sunday. The theme, “Christ through us,” will cover all three Sundays. Worship resources will be created in cooperation with Congregational Services for The Foundation.

The following anniversary projects are either in the production stage or the planning stage.

1. *Christ through Us: A Pictorial History of the Wisconsin Synod, 1850-2025* will be published by summer 2025. John Braun and Joel Otto are co-authors. Susan Willems, the WELS archivist, has been collaborating on photo selection. Chris Cordes is the Northwestern Publishing House editor overseeing the product. Paul Burmeister of Wisconsin Lutheran College is the project design manager. The book will be about 250 pages and retail for about \$30.
2. When the writing and photo selection for the pictorial history book is completed, Boettcher+Trinklein Television will be producing a series of seven short videos coordinating with the seven chapters of the book. Lee Hitter will be overseeing this project. A Bible study may also be published to coordinate with the videos.
3. John Brenner has revised and expanded *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans*, the history book written by Edward Fredrich published in 1992. This book will be available by summer 2025.
4. An interactive timeline of WELS history will be put together for the WELS website.
5. A series of articles on key individuals in our synod’s history will appear in *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*. Additional articles will be written for the *WELS Historical Institute Journal*. *Forward in Christ* will also focus on the anniversary in various ways throughout 2025. Articles in both *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* and *Forward in Christ* will be written that focus on the importance of knowing and studying history, especially our synod’s history.
6. Ready-made newsletter articles and bulletin inserts on WELS history will also be distributed for use by congregations during 2025.

Other resources (short YouTube videos, historical vignettes, etc.) may also be produced. In addition, a template for displaying a congregation’s history on its website may also be provided.

It is the prayer of the committee that this anniversary will increase awareness of both the importance of knowing and studying our synod’s history and a growing appreciation for God’s grace to WELS for 175 years. There are very few Lutheran church bodies that have retained their identity and can trace their history as far back as WELS can. That is a gift of God’s grace working through his Word. Our synod has had the privilege of proclaiming that message of God’s grace in Christ for 175 years. This is a story worth remembering and telling.

Prof. Joel Otto, reporter

Prof. Joel Otto, chairman
Rev. John Braun
Prof. em. John Brenner
Prof. Aaron Christie
Rev. Chris Cordes
Mr. Lee Hitter
Prof. Paul Koelpin
Rev. Benjamin Phelps
Mrs. Julie Wietzke
Mrs. Susan Willems

WELS Support Committee

Our calling

The elders who lead well should be considered worthy of double honor, especially the ones who work hard in the word and doctrine" (1 Timothy 5:17). In our Wisconsin Synod, one way we seek to show such honor to those who serve in gospel ministry is through the WELS Support Committee. This committee has the privilege of providing financial assistance to retired called workers and/or surviving spouses who do not have adequate financial resources for everyday living expenses. The following factors guide our committee as we seek to carry out our calling.

- The fund is not an entitlement program.
- The fund is not an extension of the synod's pension plan.
- The financial assistance received is a charitable gift from the synod to those in need.
- The fund is not established to provide temporary assistance for those who resigned from the ministry.
- The fund does not grant financial assistance to those who need assisted living and nursing home care.
- The fund is not intended to be the main source of income. Assets and other means of income are expected to be used first, with Support Committee assistance supplementing those resources.

Our current situation

The Support Committee is composed of five district first vice presidents of WELS. The first vice president in every district is the contact person for the Support Committee. Each year the district first vice presidents reach out to local pastors, circuit pastors, and district officers to request their help in making sure the Support Committee is made aware of retired called workers and/or their surviving spouses who may need financial help. Once a possible recipient is identified, a simple application form is used to help determine the level of need. The Support Committee then reviews all the applications received and must approve them before assistance begins. The annual amount budgeted for this work is \$310,000. Currently 21 individuals or couples throughout the synod receive support. The total annual amount currently being distributed is around \$297,560. It also often happens that during the course of the year new requests are made to the Support Committee. What a blessing that our Lord allowed our synod to take care of all those who sought assistance.

A look ahead

The Support Committee will continue to provide assistance to retired called workers and/or their surviving spouses as long as synod finances make it possible. Please speak with your pastor, circuit pastor, or district first vice president to inquire about gifts through the Support Committee.

Subscriptions to *Forward in Christ*, *Meditations*, and *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* are also provided to those recipients who request them. The Support Committee thanks Northwestern Publishing House for covering the costs of these subscriptions.

Rev. Brett Brauer, reporter

Rev. Brett Brauer, chairman

Rev. Timothy Ehlers

Rev. Michael Enderle

Rev. Stephen Helwig

Rev. Wayne Schoch

Continuing Education for Called Workers Committee

Our calling

The Continuing Education for Called Workers (CECW) Committee coordinates our synod's efforts to assist called workers to grow in faith, knowledge, and skill to carry out their unique vocations. Growth for our called workers is not about advancing in a career, gaining recognition, or increasing compensation. Growth for our called workers is about growing in the gospel in order to be clearer presenters of God's mercy wherever God has called, whether that is in the home, the church or school, or the community.

The Continuing Education for Called Workers Committee works to help synodical leaders and calling bodies clearly understand why it is wise for calling bodies to invest in the growth of their called workers. To that end, the committee also seeks to urge lay leaders to understand the importance of investing in assisting current called workers toward growth in letting Christ's love be ever more clearly seen.

The Continuing Education for Called Workers Committee includes representatives from the Board for Ministerial Education, Martin Luther College, and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary as well as representatives from WELS Congregational Services. By the synod's constitution, our chairman is the first vice president of the synod, and we report to the Conference of Presidents (COP). Our report is divided into the committee's work for pastors, for teachers, and for staff ministers.

Pastors

Our current situation

We thank God for the good work that is being done by so many entities in our church body encouraging pastors to grow. A considerable part of that work has been entrusted to Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (WLS), which carries out most of this work through Grow in Grace. Grow in Grace seeks to partner with pastors for spiritual and professional growth in informal (not-for-credit) and formal (for-credit) ways.

To supplement informal study by pastors, Grow in Grace provides the following: a monthly digital newsletter called *Grace Notes*, a monthly digital newsletter called *The Four Branches*, periodic book reviews called *Shepherd's Study*, study packets, a three-year mentoring program called Pastor Partners, and celebrations of ministry retreats for men who have served in the pastoral ministry for 3, 10, 25, and 35 years. Grow in Grace spends approximately \$2,000 per year to make thousands of journals available to all WLS alumni through the AtlaSerials Database on the WLS website under "library resources." This is a valuable resource for both informal and formal continuing education.

Grow in Grace offers formal courses in a Master of Sacred Theology (STM) degree program. The best time for pastors to commit to earning an STM degree is after they have been serving for a few years and before they celebrate 20 years in ministry. A certificate or an STM degree can be earned in one of nine focus areas: Biblical Theology—New Testament, Biblical Theology—Old Testament, Church History, Education, Missions and Evangelism, Pastoral Care, Pastoral Leadership, Preaching and Worship, and Systematic Theology. In 2022, the departments of the faculty have reviewed and updated the goals and courses for their STM focus areas. Pastors may take these for-credit courses through on-campus Summer Quarter in even-numbered years, satellite Summer Quarter courses in the districts in odd-numbered years, online courses in any year, and WLS Winterim courses in January. Our goal is to have 100 pastors on campus for Summer Quarter 2024. Qualifying credits from partner institutions and guided research under the supervision of an advisor may also contribute to a certificate or an STM degree. Pastors are also able to audit satellite Summer Quarter courses in their districts in odd-numbered years.

More than 200 pastors have been mentored by Pastor Partners, a program formally adopted by the synod in 2015 that provides a new seminary graduate with three years of focused encouragement from a trained pastoral mentor. God is blessing us with retaining a higher percentage of new pastors than we have seen since the 1980s. There may be many reasons for this; humanly speaking the mentoring program seems to be a key component. John Brenner, professor emeritus, serves as the coordinator, working with a Mentor Leadership Team of seven pastors.

Three essay/workbook resources were prepared under former WLS Prof. Richard Gurgel's leadership to help pastors plan for growth. "Guard What Has Been Entrusted to Your Care" encourages pastors to guard the gifts of time, faith, health, and brothers/sisters. "Reclaiming Our Christ-Centered Lutheran Devotional Heritage" helps pastors strengthen their devotional life. "Fan God's Gifts into Flame" helps pastors approach planning for growth from a biblical perspective. The seminary continues to offer these resources on its website at wisluthsem.org.

About two dozen parish pastors partner with *Shepherd's Study* to share several book reviews digitally each month. About a dozen pastors partner in *The Four Branches*, an e-newsletter shared with all pastors each month that offers a brief article of interest in each of the four areas of theological study. Each monthly newsletter is opened by about 1,100 pastor recipients with a 37 percent click-through rate.

A look ahead

Under the leadership of Bradley Wordell, a professor at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Grow in Grace will work with local circuit pastors to seek their input on providing formal continuing education that will support informal continuing education in their circuits. Grow in Grace will also continue to work with the WLS faculty and with valued adjunct instructors to provide a quality formal continuing education program that will serve the needs of WELS pastors and congregations in the 21st century.

Teachers

Our current situation

WELS teachers or aspiring WELS teachers who need ministry or professional certification should contact John Meyer at Martin Luther College (MLC), meyerjd@mlc-wels.edu, 507-354-3221 ext. 398, to determine the next steps in their course of study.

To encourage development in educational leadership, WELS Commission on Lutheran Schools (CLS) provides financial and professional development support to men and women in the Principal Training Program, Director Training Program, Principal Credential Cohort, Director Credential Cohort, and Director Apprentice mentoring programs. For more information, write to lutheranschools@wels.net.

Commission on Lutheran Schools encourages all teachers to have a Ministry Development Plan. CLS also continues to support federations and individual schools desiring training to support the Ministerial Growth and Evaluation Process that was launched in 2020.

Continuing education resources from Martin Luther College

MLC strives to offer relevant, high-quality, affordable courses to help meet the needs of WELS teachers. Courses are available in:

- Early Childhood
- Educational Technology
- Graduate Studies
- Ministry Certification
- Pastors' Courses
- Special Education
- Satellites—asynchronous on-location courses
- Synchronous Online Courses

Educational formats include certificate programs, degree programs, stand-alone courses, webinars, and micro-credentials.

Two new graduate degree programs at Martin Luther College

The Master of Science in Special Education with MN Learning Disabilities Licensure program is designed for teachers who want to serve learners with special needs in WELS schools. The program provides Minnesota licensure in Learning Disabilities both as a stand-alone license for existing WELS teachers and as an add-on for MLC undergraduates completing their ABS (Academic Behavioral Specialist) license.

Graduate students in this program follow a prescribed set of special education courses, complete a six-week internship, and take two state-required licensure tests. The program is coordinated with MLC's undergraduate special education major, enabling undergraduate students to earn their master's degree and specialty license at a faster pace and a lower cost.

The Master of Science in Educational Administration—Technology Director program expands on the existing educational technology emphasis to target the activities and skills specific to directors, including managing infrastructure, budgeting, and leading technology professional development. A new elective focuses on enhancing all areas of ministry with technology.

Expanded support for existing early childhood teachers

In response to the need for onboarding and training early childhood teachers for developmentally appropriate teaching and ministry, MLC and CLS are developing tiered support with multiple entry-points.

- Tier One: Free resources for use by directors for onboarding new hires for ministry and teaching. Twenty-five free training modules in five high-need areas. Located on the MLC website, mlc-wels.edu.
- Tier Two: Three one-credit courses to earn the Child Development Association (CDA) credential in one semester. Training includes preparation for the test, portfolio, and classroom visit needed to earn the credential. The CDA credential is a nationally recognized first step in professional recognition for early childhood teachers.
- Tier Three: A revamped Teaching Ministry Certification for Early Childhood Teachers provides the theological and professional training for ministry in a Lutheran context. This 18-credit program, together with the CDA credential, can qualify a teacher to be locally called by a congregation.
- Tier Four: An Associate's of Applied Science in Early Childhood degree for existing lead and assistant teachers. The ideal candidate has some college background already.

Non-traditional pathway for licensure

This competency-based model is to support the recruitment and training of elementary teachers in WELS ministry. The target audiences are adults wishing to retrain for teaching ministry and nontraditional students identified for training and service in unique local contexts. This program makes any Lutheran school a potential MLC satellite location. The first cohort of the Competency-Based Education (CBE) program is set to begin in fall 2024.

A look ahead

OpenLearning@MLC, a two-day free virtual conference, June 18–19, 2024, will focus on ministry to non-member children and to students with special needs.

WELS Lutheran Schools will host the National Teachers Conference in Green Bay, Wis., in June 2025.

In Ecclesiastes 4:12, Solomon writes, “Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.” These words of Solomon suggest that there is indeed strength in numbers. Serving in ministry can be extremely demanding, and the events of the past few years have made it even more challenging for many. Do you know a person or two who could use some encouragement? Are you in need of a support system yourself? Consider the idea of forming a triad with two other colleagues to provide mutual support and encouragement to one another. Find resources at cls.welsrc.net/connect.

Staff ministers

Our current situation

Staff minister continuing education begins with the annual Staff Minister Conference and its opportunities for networking and spiritual growth.

Martin Luther College's Master of Arts in Theological Studies (MATS) is recommended for ministry-certified staff ministers. It is a 100 percent online degree program that contributes to the spiritual and professional growth of individuals by equipping them to be reflective, competent, and dedicated workers in the kingdom through advanced studies in Scripture, doctrine, church history, and ministry.

A look ahead

As congregations make their ministry plans in view of our current called worker shortages, they might consider calling local WELS people who already have degrees to serve provisionally as staff ministers. These people might be unable or unlikely to take residential classes at MLC. The Ministry Recruitment Task Force is recommending that the MLC Office of Graduate Studies and Continuing Education work with the MLC Staff Ministry program to develop a certificate of theology for WELS people called as staff ministers in their home congregations.

Rev. Paul Prange, reporter

Rev. James Huebner, WELS first vice president and chairman

Rev. Paul Prange, administrator of WELS Board for Ministerial Education and secretary
Rev. Jonathan Hein, coordinator of WELS Congregational Services
Prof. John Meyer, director of continuing education and graduate studies, Martin Luther College
Prof. Lawrence Olson, director of staff ministry, Martin Luther College
Teacher Jim Rademan, director of WELS Commission on Lutheran Schools
Prof. Bradley Wordell, director of continuing education, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary

Commission on Inter-Church Relations

Our calling

The WELS Bylaws charge the Commission on Inter-Church Relations (CICR) to “serve under the Conference of Presidents by representing the synod in doctrinal discussions with other church bodies who are, or are not, in fellowship with the synod” and to “keep itself informed on the doctrinal trends in other church bodies.” This function is in keeping with the object and purpose of the synod: to “extend and conserve the true doctrine and practice of the Evangelical Lutheran Church” (WELS Constitution, Article IV).

To carry out its calling, the Commission on Inter-Church Relations gathers twice each year for regular meetings, at which time it receives updates from sister synods throughout the world. Some members of the Commission on Inter-Church Relations represent WELS at the conventions of sister synods as well. The Commission on Inter-Church Relations also assists individuals and churches around the world who are seeking to take confessional Lutheran stances. Finally, commission members stay abreast of happenings in other Lutheran church bodies around the world through the reading of their periodicals and personal interaction.

Our current situation

The origins of the CICR go back to the days leading up to our suspension of fellowship with the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod. In the early years, our commission was occupied mainly in doctrinal discussions with other Lutheran church bodies in the Western world. Gradually our work has shifted to discussion partners predominantly in the non-Western parts of the world, where the gospel is bearing much fruit. As a result, the CICR now works closely with WELS Board for World Missions (BWM) in assisting established and emerging church bodies from around the globe who are looking for fellowship with WELS and/or for assistance in educating their pastors in confessional Lutheranism. Many of the inquiring groups are either breaking off from established church bodies or are seeking fellowship and assistance after leaving other church federations. Some are self-supporting church bodies, while others require mission assistance.

Larry Schlomer, administrator of WELS World Missions, also serves as a part-time CICR administrator. CICR members are assigned to work in tandem with the World Missions One Teams. (See the report of the Board for World Missions beginning on p. 73.) The CICR representatives on the One Teams represent the inter-church perspective on the team. They attend the One Team meetings most appropriate for each team and, through that connection, have a voice in how WELS interacts with the various sister churches in a team’s designated area of the world. The CICR representatives provide doctrinal guidance when the members of a One Team respond to inquiries from churches interested in establishing fellowship ties with WELS. Several years ago, the CICR developed a four-stage “toolkit” containing guidelines for the various visits, interviews, doctrinal discussions, and official communication that take place between WELS representatives and church bodies that are seeking fellowship with WELS. As the discussions with such a church pick up momentum, the CICR representative usually makes an onsite visit to the church as it moves into stages two through four of the fellowship toolkit. The toolkit has resulted in increasing blessings in our communication with the church bodies throughout the world with whom we are now in fellowship or are in the process of establishing fellowship. The CICR representatives to the various One Teams are as follows:

- Asia One Team: Benjamin Tomczak, John Koelpin, Nicolas Schmoller
- One Africa Team: Bradley Wordell

- One Europe Team: James Danell, Keith Wessel
- One Latin America Team: Bart Brauer

Here's a brief overview of our work on the various continents.

Africa

Fellowship relationships and cooperation in work on the continent of Africa continue with our long-time partners in Malawi, Zambia, Nigeria, and Cameroon, as well as with our more recent partners, the Lutheran Church of Ethiopia, the Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ–Kenya, the Evangelical Lutheran Diocese of Kenya, and the Obadiah Lutheran Synod of Uganda, the last of which was welcomed into our fellowship at our 2023 synod convention. The four-stage toolkit was developed for our work in Africa and was the process followed in our successful talks with the Obadiah Lutheran Synod. The toolkit is being followed in our discussions currently taking place with the African Missions Evangelical Church in Tanzania. The One Africa Team is also coordinating outreach to South Sudanese refugees in Ethiopia and Kenya and is in the preliminary discussion stage with four other church bodies. The One Africa Team also offers pastoral education to several of the African fields through its Confessional Lutheran Institute.

Asia

WELS is working with sister churches in Japan, Australia, the Philippines, Indonesia, India, East Asia, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and South Korea, in addition to the mission work being done by our Board for World Missions in this vast area. Several factors make the work of church relations in this part of the world difficult. First is the vast diversity of people groups in Asia and the Pacific Rim. Second is the difficulty in travel, communication, and gaining entrance/residence into many of these countries. The CICR is assisting in building relationships with many of these groups as we are able. However, the tenuousness of several of our enterprises in this part of the world reminds us that man proposes, but God disposes. It was hoped that Asia Lutheran Seminary in Hong Kong would quickly relocate and spread its operation to Thailand. While Asia Lutheran Seminary's operations will remain in Thailand, the cost of doing work there has skyrocketed, and two of our missionaries who were stationed there as a "hub" for Asian work are now being relocated to Australia and New Zealand. The beautiful seminary that WELS helped to build in Hanoi, Vietnam, still is not being fully used by our instructors of the pastors of the Hmong Fellowship Church. And yet that instruction goes on online and with temporary visits. The first cohort of pastors has already been through the program, and the next two cohorts have begun their work in it. We continue to pray God will bless our efforts and give to his church in this part of the world faithful pastors who can strengthen the confessional Lutheran presence in Asia.

Europe

In Europe we have fellowship with churches and congregations in Scandinavia, Germany, Latvia, Ukraine, Portugal, Albania, Russia, Bulgaria, and the Czech Republic. We have long-standing relationships with all of these churches. They are all small, and all struggle with raising up the next generation of pastors. Our missionary Luke Wolfgramm recently settled near our German sister church's seminary in Leipzig, Germany, after having to leave Russia when it attacked Ukraine. Wolfgramm stays in regular, personal contact with nearly all of our European sister churches and offers his encouragement to them, in addition to serving as an adjunct faculty member at the Leipzig seminary. WELS continues to send financial assistance to the church in Ukraine, including special gifts given to help the church since the war began. We are also supporting the gospel outreach that our sister church in Portugal is doing in Brazil.

Latin America

We continue to interact with and encourage sister churches in Puerto Rico, Mexico, Brazil, Peru, and Chile, as well as the recently formed *Iglesia Cristo WELS Internacional*, which reaches out to all Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America. Fellowship with *Iglesia Cristo WELS Internacional* was affirmed at the 2023 WELS convention after the CICR assisted it in formulating its founding documents. Through the online learning program *Academia Cristo*, *Iglesia Cristo WELS Internacional* has reached countless people in virtually all Latin American countries. As people progress through the structured courses in *Academia Cristo*, leaders emerge who gather people together for worship and Bible study. *Iglesia Cristo WELS Internacional* has sought CICR's advice on making sure that these leaders are properly prepared for the work entrusted to them and properly called into public ministry. Paul Wendland, professor emeritus, recently gave a presentation to those involved in this work on the doctrine of ministry and its applications to world mission fields.

Evangelical Lutheran Synod

In the United States, WELS has enjoyed fellowship with our sister church body, the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS), for over a century. The CICR and COP Doctrine Committee interact with the ELS on a regular basis to foster the unity of faith that we treasure with this sister synod. The two groups met most recently at the beginning of February. CICR

member Thomas Fricke attended the 2023 ELS convention. Highlights of the convention included formal recognition of fellowship between the ELS and the Evangelical Lutheran Diocese of Kenya (ELDK) and the adoption of Our Redeemer Lutheran Church in Brisbane, Australia, as an official field under the ELS Board for World Outreach.

Informal talks with the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod

The 2023 WELS convention reaffirmed that synod leaders, including several men on the CICR, should continue informal talks with the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS), with whom we are not in fellowship. The informal talks have been held once a year since 2012 between WELS, the LCMS, and the ELS. So WELS President Mark Schroeder, along with WELS representatives John Brenner, Michael Jensen, Thomas Nass, Paul Prange, Earle Treptow, and Joel Voss, met again this past December with representatives of the LCMS and ELS in Jacksonville, Fla. Since the doctrine of ministry is where the greatest differences between WELS/ELS and LCMS lie, the items on the agenda for the meeting were: 1) a discussion of Acts 6 and how it informs us to what extent the work of the seven men appointed by the apostles to “wait on tables” was public ministry, 2) a study of the history of the doctrine of ministry in WELS and in the LCMS, 3) further development of a document that lists where the two sides agree and where they differ on the doctrine of ministry, and 4) a discussion of how today’s culture affects the church. This past January, Schroeder reported on this meeting in the *Together* e-newsletter. At that time, he stated that “plans are being made to meet again in December 2024 and to distribute a fuller report about our meetings in 2025.” In addition, Bill Tackmier of the CICR attended the LCMS convention from July 29 through Aug. 3, 2023, in Milwaukee as the official WELS observer.

Note: Informal talks differ from formal talks. Formal doctrinal discussions occur when there is reason to believe there may be doctrinal agreement. WELS and the LCMS are not in a position for the possibility of doctrinal agreement to be in view at this time.

Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference

Members of the CICR regularly monitor and participate in the activities of the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference (CELC), the international association of churches in fellowship with WELS. The CELC met in convention June 6-8, 2023, in Seoul, South Korea. It was the first in-person convention since 2017, with two attempts in the meantime having been canceled because of COVID. The 94 registrants came from 27 countries and represented 25 of the 34 CELC member churches. The following papers were presented at the convention: An exegesis of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, a doctrinal paper on civil government, a Confessions paper focusing on Articles I and II of the Formula of Concord, a church history paper on Lutheranism in East Asia, and a practical paper on the training of laity for evangelism. Thomas Nass (WELS) was re-elected CELC president, Timothy Buelow (ELS) vice president, Nathan Seiltz (WELS) secretary, and Bradley Kerkow (ELS) and Jonathan Bare (WELS) planning committee members. James Danell represented the CICR at the convention. The next convention of the CELC will be held, God willing, in Zambia, Africa, in 2026. For more information about the CELC, see its website, celc.info.

In February, the Global Theological Education Committee of the CELC also hosted an online conference for all those in our worldwide fellowship involved in pastoral training. CICR member Bradley Wordell organized and led the conference on behalf of the Global Theological Education Committee. The conference offered confessional Lutheran seminary educators in the CELC a chance to meet and encourage each other, learn more about the theological training programs of sister churches, discuss how each goes about theological training, and explore ways of sharing resources and collaborating in their work.

The Europe Region of the CELC held a regional conference at the end of May. The theme of the conference was “Prepared to answer.” The four topics presented for study and discussion included our glorious hope, defending our glorious hope, the reasons for our glorious hope, and giving hopeful answers to those who are asking. The last two study and discussion topics were presented by Mark Paustian of Martin Luther College.

A look ahead

Much of the CICR’s meeting time is spent brainstorming ways for us to better educate church leaders who come to us looking for the unconditional gospel. They hear our preachers proclaiming it, often through the Internet, and they are drawn to it. They want to share it with the people in their part of the world. Our meetings this year have been spent discussing wonderful opportunities, like the one afforded by *Iglesia Cristo WELS Internacional* in Latin America. This young church body, spawned by *Academia Cristo’s* online education curriculum, needs strong pastors to plant their envisioned congregations. A question that has consumed much of our time is: How can we best assist such young churches in providing thorough theological education to their pastors so that they produce strong confessional Lutheran congregations?

One challenge that faces us in this pursuit in Africa and Asia is the sparsity of sound Lutheran theological literature in the native languages of these continents. For instance, how can we help groups study the Lutheran Confessions when the entirety of the Book of Concord is not yet available in their language? We pray that efforts like this will bear fruit so that the evangelical Lutheran church of the future looks more like the multitude that the apostle John saw in his revelation—made up of people from every nation, tribe, people, and language (Revelation 7:9).

A final thank you

This summer Jonathan Balge concludes his final term on the CICR. We thank him for his 12 years of service to the commission, during which he served as our contact man for our sister church in Latvia.

Prof. Bill Tackmier, reporter

Prof. James Danell, chairman
Rev. Bart Brauer, vice chairman
Prof. Bill Tackmier, secretary
Rev. Jonathan Balge
Rev. Thomas Fricke
Rev. John Koelpin
Prof. Joel Otto
Prof. Nicolas Schmoller
Rev. Benjamin Tomczak
Prof. Bradley Wordell

Ex officio:

Rev. Mark Schroeder, WELS president

Advisory:

Rev. James Huebner, WELS first vice president
Rev. Paul Nitz, World Missions One Teams counselor
Rev. Larry M. Schlomer, administrator of WELS Commission on Inter-Church Relations and WELS Board for World Missions
Rev. Earle Treptow, president of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary

Ministry of Christian Giving

Our calling

WELS Ministry of Christian Giving (MCG) serves on behalf of the Conference of Presidents to encourage every WELS member to “excel in the grace of giving” through Christ. It is our privilege to help God’s people offer gifts to Jesus for his work in their congregations, synod, and WELS-affiliated ministries.

The Ministry of Christian Giving assists the Conference of Presidents with its responsibility to fund the Lord’s work through our synod. This funding is provided through Congregation Mission Offerings (CMO) as well as direct gifts to WELS from individuals, groups, and foundations.

- In the area of CMO, our efforts are focused on informing congregations of ministry opportunities and needs, particularly as they prayerfully set their annual commitments. We also send congregations quarterly reports of their offerings to WELS.
- In the area of direct gifts from individuals, we regularly mail and e-mail appeals for support of our gospel work. We provide information to donors about Christian estate planning and other planned giving options that allow them to give in a way that is beneficial for them, their families, and the ministries close to their hearts. WELS Christian giving counselors (currently 12.1 full-time equivalents including 2 semi-retired and 11 full-time) are called workers

serving all 12 districts of WELS who apply scriptural principles to the gift planning process. Since their services are funded by our church body, there is no cost to individuals or congregations for their assistance.

- Gifts from foundations often result from consultation between the Ministry of Christian Giving director, other synod leaders, and the foundations regarding their goals for supporting WELS ministry.

Our current situation

Congregation Mission Offerings

The Ministry of Christian Giving coordinates with WELS Communication Services to share Congregation Mission Offering updates and ministry impact through WELS media. Each year the Ministry of Christian Giving oversees the process of collecting congregational offering subscriptions beginning in late summer and lasting through the first Friday of February. This involves mailed and e-mailed communications as well as direct follow-up by our Ministry of Christian Giving district chairmen. We are happy to report a 99 percent participation rate in the subscription setting process for 2024 (the average participation rate over the past ten years has been 98 percent).

In addition, we collaborate with Communication Services to develop a yearly video as well as the WELS annual report, *Your gifts, God's blessings*, to inform members of the work being done through congregational offerings. We praise our Lord and thank our congregations for a fourth record-setting year of CMO in a row in 2023, a generous response to Christ's love! (For details on CMO pledged and received, see the report of the ministry financial plan on p. 57.)

Donor nurture

At the direction of the Conference of Presidents, the Ministry of Christian Giving contracted with consulting firm BWF from 2020–2023 to especially focus on nurturing relationships with prospective major and mid-level donors and to connect donors' Christian giving interests with our areas of ministry. The Conference of Presidents established two new roles recommended by BWF: prospect analyst (Reuben Schmitz has served in this position since 2021) and database specialist (Christy Frey starts her work in summer 2024). These positions enable the Ministry of Christian Giving to segment and intentionally nurture each family according to its Christian giving interests, giving frequency, and how the Lord has blessed them. Since September 2021, we have held monthly portfolio review meetings with each Christian giving counselor to review their recent donor service and God's blessings on their efforts.

Here are the results of this nurture of individual donors by our WELS Christian giving counselors and director in FY23:

- 1,357 meaningful meetings (in-person, Zoom, phone) with donors;
- 2,664 meaningful contacts (phone calls, e-mails, mailings) with donors;
- \$11.1 million in immediate gifts from assigned donors;
- \$28.3 million in deferred expectancies from assigned donors;
- 1,187 potential major donors were assigned; and
- 202 opportunities for major gifts (current and deferred) were funded, totaling \$40.5 million.

Christian giving counselors

Through face-to-face, phone, and Zoom visits and presentations, our Christian giving counselors invite faith-prompted support of WELS ministries. During each of the past 16 fiscal years (FY08–FY23), the Christian giving counselors have averaged (per full-time equivalent) 246 meaningful face-to-face donor visits and have nurtured \$556,106 in immediate gifts (16-year total of \$113 million—annual average of \$7,059,317) and \$2,262,543 in new/revised deferred expectancies (16-year total of \$466 million—annual average of \$29,095,873).

From July 1, 2022, through March 17, 2023, WELS Christian giving counselors conducted 1,991 meaningful contacts with donors in their portfolios; made 991 meaningful contacts with donors beyond their portfolios; presented 90 times on WELS' mission and ministry, WELS Home Mission's 100 missions in 10 years initiative, tax-wise giving, and Christian estate planning; and helped donors fund 170 major gift opportunities (current and deferred), totaling \$32.6 million. We have received by God's grace \$8 million in immediate gifts from those to whom our Christian giving counselors are assigned, \$24.3 million in new/revised expectancies arranged, and \$2.7 million in new irrevocable expectancies (charitable gift annuities and charitable remainder trusts).

For the 2023–25 biennium, our church body is annually investing approximately \$1.68 and \$1.71 million in our field staff and about \$832,000 and \$878,000 in our office staff (including appeals, Christian giving counselor materials, and database fees) so that we may serve Jesus, his gifted people, and our areas of ministry. In view of the 16-year totals for immediate gifts and deferred expectancies mentioned above, we thank our Lord for the generous return he's given our investment in the Ministry of Christian Giving.

Pat Ruehrdanz (current giving counselor for the Northern Wisconsin District) and Terry Helton (deferred giving counselor for the Michigan and North Atlantic Districts) started their Christian giving service in May 2023. Michael Hatzung (senior deferred giving counselor in the Minnesota District and team captain of the deferred Christian giving counselors) began a Christian giving counselor retirement call as of Jan. 1, 2024. Ralph LePore has accepted the call to serve as deferred Christian giving counselor in the Arizona-California and Pacific Northwest Districts. Jerry Ewings, current giving counselor for the Western Wisconsin District, accepted a call to return to parish ministry. We thank our Lord for Ewings' faithful service to Jesus and his people in partnership with us for the past six-plus years.

Martin Luther College competency-based education campaign

The Ministry of Christian Giving helped Martin Luther College with encouraging gifts for this new program that provides a more flexible way for non-traditional students to obtain a teaching degree. We rejoice that the initiative has received gifts and pledges totaling almost \$724,000 as of March 15, 2024.

100 missions in 10 years

The Ministry of Christian Giving is coordinating with Home Missions through June 2024 on the 100 Missions in 10 Years synodwide initiative that was approved at the 2021 synod convention and launched in September 2022. From July 1, 2021, through March 15, 2024, the Lord has graciously allowed WELS to receive 2,624 gifts from 1,718 individuals/groups totaling \$3.05 million to be used toward establishing 100 new home missions and enhancing 75 mission congregations during 2023–2033.

Luther Preparatory School music center campaign

The Ministry of Christian Giving is partnering with Luther Preparatory School, WELS Chief Financial Officer Kyle Egan, and consulting firm Generis on launching a capital campaign to build a new music center.

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary campaign feasibility study

The Ministry of Christian Giving, along with WELS Chief Financial Officer Kyle Egan, is also assisting Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary as it works with consulting firm Generis on a capital campaign feasibility study for a new education building that provides a central location for two large flexible classrooms and four small flexible classrooms, a gathering hall addition for the gymnasium, and faculty office renovations.

Appeals

The Ministry of Christian Giving works closely with our WELS areas of ministry and ministerial education schools to send about 13 mailed appeals as well as 4 to 12 e-appeals each year. Each of the synod's four main areas of ministry receives two of the annual mailed appeal slots and several e-appeals, while other initiatives (e.g., Commission on Inter-Church Relations, Christian Aid and Relief, Mission and Ministry, and WELS endowments) receive one mailed appeal slot per year. Another annual appeal encourages charitable gift annuities managed by WELS Foundation. The appeals coordinate with other WELS media including *WELS Connection*, *Forward in Christ*, WELS' websites, and the *Together* e-newsletter. Over the past 10 fiscal years, the appeals have produced an average net income of \$966,382 per year.

WELS endowment funds

In 2005, synod convention delegates prayerfully considered how WELS could support gospel ministry in a predictable and ever-increasing manner. One answer was to establish the WELS endowments, which benefit the Lord's work in WELS Missions and at our four ministerial education schools. Out of gratitude for God's love and a desire to help more people know Jesus as their Savior, WELS members have faithfully contributed to these endowments, resulting in nearly \$122 million in gifts received (\$37.7 million) and expected (\$84 million) through 2023. In July 2023, the annual distribution from the WELS endowments was \$1.3 million. We praise God for these blessings!

Encouragement of planned gifts

The Ministry of Christian Giving's congregational planned giving program manual helps congregations promote planned giving opportunities to members. It also provides guidance on setting up a planned giving committee as well as establishing and administering an endowment fund. Our Christian giving counselors are available to introduce the planned giving program to congregational leaders. Learn more at wels.net/plannedgivingprogram.

The spring edition of the *Grace of Giving* newsletter shares the story of a congregation with a successful planned giving committee. *Grace of Giving* is mailed to WELS members eligible for supporting ministry through planned giving instruments. The newsletter includes inspiring stories of faithful brothers and sisters in Christ, ministry updates, and planned giving opportunities. See the latest articles at wels.net/graceofgiving.

In recent years qualified charitable distributions from IRAs have become a popular way for anyone 70.5 or older to support ministry. These distributions are free from federal and potentially state income tax, so donors can direct distributions to their church, synod, or other WELS ministries. As of 2023 donors can also use qualified charitable distributions to establish charitable gift annuities. The Ministry of Christian Giving works with WELS Foundation to inform donors and churches of this opportunity and provides helpful resources at wels.net/qcd.

Development counsel to other organizations

The Ministry of Christian Giving annually offers development training to Christian giving counselors, Ministerial Education mission advancement staff, Missions administrators, and anyone serving a WELS-/ELS-affiliated ministry in development. One goal of such training is to encourage a consistent approach to God's people that is Christ-centered and donor-sensitive and that minimizes potential donor fatigue and the impression that we're competitors or trying to "get" something from our fellow Christians. Thirteen people participated in our 2024 training.

WELS-affiliated ministries can arrange a part-time collaborative partnership with the Ministry of Christian Giving where our counselors represent their organizations on visits with members. Contact Kurt Lueneburg, WELS director of Christian Giving, at 414-256-3214 or kurt.lueneburg@wels.net for more information.

Improved event registration and e-mails

WELS Ministry of Christian Giving worked with WELS Missions and WELS Technology to utilize current software to better manage event registrations and promotional e-mails. The new tools allow for more efficient data processing and will reduce expenses.

A look ahead

Lord willing, WELS Ministry of Christian Giving will move forward with the following initiatives:

- We will continue to praise and thank God for the offerings of his faithful people to his Church and encourage strong congregational and individual mission offerings.
- We will work with the Conference of Presidents to call a current giving counselor for the Western Wisconsin District.
- We look forward to training new Christian giving counselors and our new database specialist for service in WELS.
- We will add a mid-level donor giving counselor to our office team.
- We will continue working with WELS Home Missions, Luther Preparatory School, and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary on their respective initiatives.
- We will expand the use of our database to enhance online donations for WELS members.
- Our next WELS Christian giving training sessions for WELS/ELS advancement personnel are scheduled to take place Aug. 5–9, 2024, and Jan. 13–17, 2025. Contact us to register or receive more information (800-827-5482 or mcg@wels.net).

WELS Ministry of Christian Giving is privileged to serve our Savior and you by helping God's people to generously fund the ministries that touch their hearts. We are happy that these gifts in response to Christ's love are helping us as a synod to fulfill our calling of proclaiming Jesus' name to more and more people.

Rev. Kurt Lueneburg, reporter

Communication Services

Our calling

Communication Services exists to assist the Conference of Presidents in communicating WELS' mission to members of the synod. It is responsible for a clear and consistent communication of the synod's mission from the synod's national office and for exploring, supporting, and expediting innovative media usage and shared communication for

WELS ministries and congregations. It is also responsible for reviewing and authorizing all new communications originating in the synod's national office.

Our current situation

The Communication Services staff is focused on creating and promoting the following communication initiatives to support the ongoing mission and ministry of the synod.

Forward in Christ

Forward in Christ has been the official magazine of WELS for 112 years. Published monthly in both print and digital formats, *Forward in Christ* brings Lutherans together through shared stories of faith and articles that address important issues facing Christians today. *Forward in Christ* also provides an in-depth look at important biblical truths while striving to inspire its readers to live lives of Christian service. *Forward in Christ* shares news from WELS congregations, schools, ministry affiliates, and synodical areas of ministry. Each issue is designed to educate, inform, and inspire readers with quality content. In 2024, *Forward in Christ* added an online live Bible study connected to its written study. Find out more at forwardinchrist.net/online-study.

Currently *Forward in Christ* has more than 29,000 monthly subscribers; bulk subscriptions to congregations comprise the great majority of that number, with 900 congregations subscribing. Monthly issues of the magazine can be delivered in bulk to the church or sent directly to members' homes—all at a reduced cost from the individual subscription price. It is a budget-friendly way for churches to keep members connected to quality Christian reading material. With each bulk shipment to congregations, *Forward in Christ* includes a one-page newsletter for pastors entitled "Share what's inside" that highlights that issue's content and easy ways to share the content with members. Visit nph.net/fic for current subscription information.

Forward in Christ's dedicated website, forwardinchrist.net, provides content from each monthly issue as well as supplementary materials. This past December, *Forward in Christ* offered devotions based on the Advent wreath in its print issue, which corresponded to an online digital flipbook complete with audio and video recordings of a Martin Luther College choir singing a suggested hymn. Readers also can sign up at forwardinchrist.net/subscribe to receive a free weekly e-newsletter filled with articles, photos, and sneak peeks.

In 2023, forwardinchrist.net had 150,000 visitors and 251,000 pageviews. Through *Forward in Christ's* Facebook and Instagram social media sites, WELS members have multiple ways to access and share the magazine's content.

If you are interested in creating more awareness of the magazine in your congregation, the executive editor, James Pope, is available for preaching engagements and Bible classes. Submit your request at forwardinchrist.net/submit. There you can also submit photos, articles, and questions for possible inclusion in the magazine.

wels.net

The synod's official website, wels.net, had more than one million unique visitors with 5.1 million pageviews in calendar year 2023. The most popular pages viewed by our visitors were Daily Devotions, the home page, call reports, Through My Bible in Three Years, and the WELS Online Yearbook. The synod's website continues to provide timely content both for WELS members and non-members who want to learn more about Jesus, WELS, and what we believe.

WELS Connection

WELS Connection, the monthly video viewed in more than 800 congregations, is entering its 38th year of providing stories that highlight the important work happening as a result of your Congregation Mission Offerings to the synod. *Forward in Christ* and the *WELS Connection* video have the proven ability to reach tens of thousands of people each month with uplifting stories and important information every member should know. We appreciate the strong partnership we share with our congregations that choose to subscribe to these inspirational products.

With the continuing decline of DVD usage and DVD player availability, starting in 2025 we will discontinue the distribution of physical DVDs for *WELS Connection*. We are transitioning to an entirely digital format, as these videos are currently available for online streaming and downloadable access. Although this transition is an adjustment for those who have relied on DVDs, the DVD replication industry is in steep decline, and the change allows us to allocate our limited financial resources toward content creation. Now is the time for congregations to transition to the video file download option available to all subscribers. The video files are available on the *WELS Connection* subscription page on the Northwestern Publishing House website at online.nph.net/wels-connection-subscription.html.

Together

Together, a bi-weekly e-newsletter, is e-mailed to more than 8,000 subscribers the first and third Tuesdays of each month. This newsletter, which often includes video as well as written features, reports on WELS news and events. To stay informed about WELS news, sign up at wels.net/subscribe.

Annual report

Your gifts, God's blessings: An annual report to our members is now available online and in print. The annual report highlights the blessings that God has showered on WELS through Congregation Mission Offerings and individual donors. To view the report online, visit wels.net/annualreport. Print copies were mailed to every congregation and to all WELS donors that made a gift in 2023. This report is a communications tool that can be used year-round to encapsulate WELS' ministry and clearly show our members how the synod is supporting ministry through their Congregation Mission Offerings. An online version of the annual report is created and shared with all parish pastors via e-mail in January, with an encouragement to forward the e-mail to their congregational leaders. New this year is a one-page, two-sided flyer that provides an overview of WELS and its ministries. The flyer is perfect for tract racks, narthex displays, and community fair booths. We plan to continue to produce this new flyer annually. Free print copies of both items are available from Northwestern Publishing House at online.nph.net/wels.

A look ahead

The Communications team creates promotional print materials, logos, and videos for use on WELS social media channels along with written stories in *Together* and *Forward in Christ* for WELS campaigns and events. The team will work on these upcoming projects:

- The 2024 WELS International Youth Rally will be held June 25–28 at Colorado State University in Fort Collins. The goal is to have more than 2,500 people in attendance.
- Taste of Missions will be held on June 15 on the campus of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in Mequon, Wis. The event kicks off with a special worship service where new home and world missionaries will be commissioned.
- The tenth annual WELS Night at the Brewers will be held Fri., July 12. Discounted tickets for WELS members and guests are reserved together in a block of seats. Ticket link: brewers.com/wels. WELS Night at the Brewers draws nearly 2,000 members each summer.
- Two other major conferences this summer include the WELS Women's Ministry Conference July 28–30 under the theme "Empowered to Proclaim" and the National Conference on Worship, Music, and the Arts July 30–Aug. 2 under the theme "Sing a New Song to the Lord."
- Communication Services continues to support the campaign to start 100 home mission congregations in 10 years as well as support 75 enhancements to help existing congregations reach more souls. A major-donor case statement was produced for Christian giving counselors' one-on-one visits. A dedicated website, wels100in10.net, was created for the initiative.
- Planning continues for the print materials and online resources needed to celebrate the 175th anniversary of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, which was established May 26, 1850. You can read an update from the anniversary planning committee on p. 12.

Other ongoing communication initiatives include:

- WELS Ministry of Christian Giving staff with Communication Services continue to produce a Congregation Mission Offering (CMO) encouragement video, *Doing more together*. The video includes the blessings and opportunities God is granting our churches through the synodical work of WELS' areas of ministry. The video highlights the ministry opportunities the Lord is providing WELS around the world. An e-mail is sent to all parish pastors with the video file link in September each year. The Ministry of Christian Giving mails a DVD to each congregation. The mailing includes the annual Congregation Mission Offering informational packet, including print resources and weblinks to guide congregations in their discussion of their Congregation Mission Offering commitment. A new *Doing more together* video and related materials will be distributed to all congregations in September 2024.
- Editorial development of the synod social media sites, Facebook and Instagram. Our Facebook page, facebook.com/welslutherans, has more than 105,000 page followers. Our Instagram page, instagram.com/welslutherans, has more than 7,000 page followers.
- Management of all synodwide electronic communication tools, including broadcast e-mails, surveys, e-newsletters, and the monthly Ministry Connection e-newsletter.

- Video production. In 2022 we added a video production coordinator to record and edit the more than 100 videos we produce each year for our areas of ministry, including *Together* video news updates and several livestreamed events. All new ministry initiatives and programs now include video content. Social media promotional videos are also created to promote synod events. You can view and download synod videos at vimeo.com/wels.

WELS Church Extension Fund

Communication Services continues to help promote monthly Church Extension Fund rates and activity to investors through website updates, broadcasts, bulletin inserts, rate sheets, activity updates, *Forward in Christ* ads, and the annual Offering Circular. In addition, graphics were created promoting the recent WELS Church Extension Fund special investment rate offering, which, by God's grace, has produced new investments. These investments will allow Church Extension Fund to provide more loans to home mission and mission-minded congregations for building and renovation projects.

WELS Foundation

Communication Services assists WELS Foundation in supporting WELS Christian giving counselors and mission advancement partners by providing access to monthly planned giving newsletters and free educational webinars, in addition to a quarterly newsletter with content to help them serve their donors. Marketing support also includes creation of the annual report, quarterly conference reports, and donor stories for the *Grace of Giving* newsletter, which is mailed to more than 14,000 donors. Upcoming marketing efforts include video bios of Christian giving counselors and more video resources on the WELS Foundation online resource center.

WELS Investment Funds

Communication Services' support of WELS Investment Funds includes the creation of the annual report, dissemination of the quarterly WELS Fund Fact sheets and conference reports, and execution of the live quarterly video webinars featuring senior investment consultants at Mercer, a global leader in institutional investing.

In conclusion

The goal of Communication Services is to work with each area of ministry and subsidiary to identify priorities and then communicate these priorities to laypeople and called workers alike through a multi-platform communication strategy. The dedicated Communication Services staff remains committed and able to continue developing content for all other essential internal communication tools, including the *Book of Reports and Memorials*, *Report to the Twelve Districts*, and *Proceedings*—the official record of each synod convention.

Mr. Lee Hitter, reporter

Congregational Services

Our calling

WELS Congregational Services exists to encourage and equip congregations for faithful and fruitful gospel ministry.

That encouragement comes through Congregational Services' members working onsite with churches and schools. Congregational Services offers several programs (described throughout this report) where an individual or team from Congregational Services will visit the congregation and assist church and school leaders as they attempt to evaluate current ministry efforts and plan for the future. Additionally, Congregational Services organizes a number of national conferences where called workers and laity alike can discuss best ministry practices and receive encouragement for our shared mission.

To help equip congregations for ministry, Congregational Services produces a wide variety of resources that churches and schools can utilize in their efforts to feed the faithful, reach the lost, and pursue the straying. Most of these are disseminated at welscongregationalservices.net. To stay up to date on the latest resources, subscribe to WELS Congregational Services' new resource update newsletter at welscongregationalservices.net/subscriptions.



Congregational Services operates in two cohorts: church and school. Congregational Services consists of six commissions:

- **Commission on Congregational Counseling**—Exists to serve congregations in their efforts to evaluate ministry efforts, congregational organization, and staffing needs; develop plans to adjust and expand ministry efforts over time; and equip lay leaders in their vital roles.
- **Commission on Discipleship**—Exists to serve congregations in their efforts to help their members grow in both their knowledge of God’s Word and their sanctified service of Christ and neighbor.
- **Commission on Evangelism**—Exists to serve congregations in their efforts to seize every opportunity the Lord provides to evangelize lost souls, both through congregational outreach efforts and through personal witnessing.
- **Commission on Lutheran Schools**—Exists to serve congregations in their efforts to provide Christian education through Lutheran schools and other early childhood ministries.
- **Commission on Special Ministries**—Exists to serve congregations in their efforts to bring the gospel to those with needs or circumstances that prevent them from being served through congregations’ usual ministries.
- **Commission on Worship**—Exists to serve congregations in their efforts to glorify God and strengthen God’s people through Word and sacrament.

Each commission has a director. Directors not only work with the commissions to plan ministry efforts and resources but also conduct in-field consultations with churches and schools when requested. Additionally, directors train volunteers to assist in operating these in-field programs. Congregational Services is thankful for the dozens of pastors, teachers, and laypeople who provide encouragement and guidance to churches and schools that request such help.

The Congregational Services Coordinating Committee consists of the directors, operations manager, coordinators, and chairmen of each commission (elected by the synod in convention). The Congregational Services Coordinating Committee prioritizes the programs and resources proposed by each of the commissions. The Congregational Services Executive Committee consists of the coordinator (a pastor), the associate coordinator (a teacher), and the operations manager (a layman). The Executive Committee is responsible for allocating the human and financial resources necessary to carry out the initiatives approved by the Congregational Services Coordinating Committee.

Congregational Services is also responsible for studying WELS statistical trends. It analyzes the data and produces an annual summary of the relevant information. Highlights from 2023 are included as an appendix to this report on p. 34. The full 2023 Statistical Summary and Analysis will be available at welsconvention.net/rtttd in June.

For the synod to carry out its global mission, it needs to have the support of a broad swath of healthy congregations. WELS' Ministerial Education system, World Missions efforts, and Home Missions work is all predicated upon having a broad base of congregations to support those efforts. Thus, by serving local congregations, Congregational Services hopes to also assist in the worldwide gospel efforts of WELS.

Our current situation

This report is intended to share a cursory view of the work of Congregational Services. Space prohibits going into detail about all of Congregational Services' programs and resources. For more information about those things, please see individual commission reports available at welsconvention.net/rtttd.

Consultations

Congregational Services offers several programs where members or teammates are onsite at churches and schools. In some cases, they work with a large segment of members as they assess ministry efforts and plan for the future. In other cases, the Congregational Services team provides training to church and school leadership. Some examples of Congregational Services' onsite programs follow.

Merging for Mission

Church mergers are becoming common in WELS. The Merging for Mission Program brings together multiple congregations in geographic proximity that are considering a partnership or even congregational consolidation. In an exploratory meeting the assigned congregational counselor explains the assorted options for mergers. If the congregations are interested in taking further steps, the assigned counselor helps them work through the necessary analysis, planning, and training to allow for a smooth merge.

AXIS

AXIS helps congregations produce a long-range plan aimed at ministry revitalization or redevelopment. The assigned congregational counselor helps the congregation define and commit to mission, envision the congregation's desired future, and identify the long-range goals that would help move the congregation in that direction.

Everyone Outreach

Everyone Outreach is designed to help congregations build a mission culture so that every member and every ministry is thinking about and participating in outreach. The program kicks off with a two-day onsite workshop where participants discover thought habits that may be keeping them from reaching out with the gospel as well and as often as they would like. Following the workshop, resources are provided that help create new thought habits resulting in new behaviors and, Lord willing, more evangelism. For more information, visit everyoneoutreach.com.

WELS School Accreditation

WELS School Accreditation is an onsite process in which the school evaluates its current education practices and seeks sound methods to build on its strengths. The program determines new ways to grow and strengthen the educational ministry of the school for the benefit of the students and parents to the glory of God. Protocols at all levels have been reviewed over the past biennium, with adjustments made to several of the standards. WELS School Accreditation is a sanctioned member of the National Council for Private School Accreditation.

Telling the Next Generation

This one-day seminar is designed for pastors, principals, early childhood directors, teachers, and church and school lay leaders. These individuals gather for a day of interactive presentations that assists congregations in the development of a harvest strategy, a plan that focuses on intentional ways for congregations to connect unchurched families with the gospel. This seminar comes at a time when nationwide 16 percent of our Lutheran elementary schools and 33 percent of our early childhood ministry children live in homes that report having no church membership.

School consultations

School consulting exists to partner with congregational consulting to help support the overall ministry of a congregation. It also provides onsite support for both congregations seeking to start a new children's ministry or receive consulting support for an existing ministry.

In 2023, Congregational Services worked with approximately 170 congregations in one of these consulting programs, approximately 13.7 percent of congregations in WELS. The goal is that by 2025, Congregational Services would have the capacity to serve 20 percent of congregations in a year if requested.

Resources

Congregational Services produces a variety of resources to help churches in their gospel efforts to feed the faithful, reach the lost, and pursue the straying. Most are disseminated at welscongregationalervices.net and are free.

The Foundation: Weekly ministry resources

The Foundation is a suite of resources that builds upon the importance of public worship both on Sunday morning and throughout the week. Resources contained in *The Foundation* include seasonal thematic worship plans, weekly worship plans, WELS Preachers Podcast, and worship series promotional graphics and videos. In addition to these free resources, all the Congregational Services devotions—WELS online daily devotions, family devotions, school devotions—capture the worship themes for that week. Thus, congregations that use *The Foundation* have a coherent, focused spiritual message that is repeated throughout the week in the homes of members who utilize those devotions. In the first year after these resources were launched, there were 81,502 unique “user events.” (That is when an individual engages with the webpage for a longer period of time and, if applicable, downloads the resources there.)

Christian Worship: Musician’s Resource

Musician’s Resource is part of the suite of *Christian Worship* products presented to our church body through the WELS Hymnal Project’s work. A committee of ten volunteers compiled additional musical scores in support of hymns, psalms, and liturgical settings in *Christian Worship*. Additional keyboard arrangements are an example of the items found in *Musician’s Resource*. However, *Musician’s Resource* also provides resources for vocalists and instrumentalists of all kinds. Lead sheets provide guitar chords. Choral arrangements of hymn stanzas or psalm verses are available for choirs. Music transposed into a different key for instruments is available as well. Congregations of all sizes can benefit from *Musician’s Resource*, from those with a full liturgical ensemble of instrumentalists to those with only one instrumentalist. *Musician’s Resource* is a living resource, continually evolving as more arrangements are added. It can be accessed on the Northwestern Publishing House website at online.nph.net/musicians-resource.

Stewardship Legacy: A comprehensive stewardship program

Every congregation possesses a rich legacy of resources given by God to carry out his ministry and to be used for Christian living. It is also our responsibility to pass this legacy on to the next generation. The *Stewardship Legacy* series teaches and encourages faithful management in multiple areas of life: time, talent, treasure, truth, and temple. The first set, titled “A Time for Everything,” is available. The second set, focusing on truth, will be available this fall.

Governance resources

This module contains tools that help churches examine and adjust their church governance (e.g., constitutional bylaws) to be more flexible, allow for more nimble decision-making, and better utilize members’ gifts and insights.

Conquerors through Christ

Conquerors through Christ helps Christians who struggle with the temptations of pornography. Its website, conquerorsthroughchrist.net, has been effective in motivating people to seek help from their pastors or professional counselors. A Bible study, “Bought at a Price”; downloadable parenting resources; and a steady stream of new resources can also be found on that website. The Conquerors through Christ Committee has also started online support groups for those who struggle with these issues.

An honest conversation: Faith and LGBTQ topics

In this video-based series, a panel of WELS college students share their real-life experiences of when their faith intersected with LGBTQ issues. Each video dives deeper into the challenges of these issues, leads teens to engage with each other in conversation, and provides encouragement and instruction about how to speak the truth in love.

Preach the Word/Worship the Lord/Teach the Word

Congregational Services produces these three newsletters. *Preach the Word* helps pastors grow in their homiletical skills. *Worship the Lord* helps pastors or worship planners think through some principles and best practices when planning worship. *Teach the Word* helps pastors, teachers, staff ministers, or lay volunteers better understand current best pedagogical practices. These three newsletters are pivoting to an all-digital format. Articles will be posted online and disseminated through e-mail lists.

Apologetics: Defend the Faith

This Bible study helps Christians understand that the theological discipline known as apologetics is really a ministry of caring. It teaches believers how to listen to skeptics and then respond clearly and lovingly with God’s Word.

WELS Youth Night

This resource provides a series of youth-focused events, held three times a year, to gather youth from congregations in geographic proximity for fellowship and Scripture study. This resource provides all the pieces needed to plan, train, promote, and host a Youth Night event. Every package in the series has its own unique event theme, keynote video, and small group discussion guide.

Marriage resources

Congregational Services produces several resources designed to help churches encourage their married members in that high calling. In addition to weekly devotional videos titled *Marriage Moments* and Bible studies titled *Marriage Maintenance*, two new resources were developed in this past biennium. *Marriage Keys* is a three-part small group discussion with leader guides for congregations to strengthen the Christian bond between husbands and wives. *Marriage for Life* is a pre-marital course for pastors to adapt for use in their setting, if so desired.

Heart Imprints

Whether you are giving a children's sermon or planning chapel for your Sunday school, early childhood ministry, or Lutheran elementary school, this resource provides ideas for your message that will coordinate with the church year and the worship being planned on Sunday. *Heart Imprints* dovetails with *The Foundation* resources.

Congregational evangelism kit

These video-based resources help congregations put all the essential elements of a congregational outreach program into place.

Women's ministry resources

Through online webinars, Bible studies, devotions, and programs like Advent/Lent by Candlelight, Women's Ministry nurtures, encourages, and equips our congregations' women to faithfully use their gifts for service in God's kingdom.

Care Committee for Called Workers handbook

This handbook helps churches operate a congregational Care Committee for Called Workers in an effort to ensure that the spiritual, physical, and emotional needs of all their called workers are being met. The handbook is found at csm.welsrc.net/download-csm/called-worker-care.

Ministry training

Congregational Services also offers ministry training to help individuals (both called workers and laity) carry out their ministry efforts.

Freedom for the Captives: Abuse prevention training

Freedom for the Captives offers a free online training program to help churches and schools develop plans to prevent child abuse on their campuses. Freedom for the Captives also provides devotions and a blog to offer support to those who have suffered the trauma of child or sexual abuse. Resources are available at freedomforcaptives.com.

Let's Go: Personal Witnessing Training

This video-based personal witness training teaches a simple, three-part approach that any Christian can put into practice. 1) Love the unchurched people God has brought into your life. 2) Listen carefully to their thoughts, beliefs, concerns, etc. 3) Lead them to the gospel. *Let's Go* can be used by both large- and small-group Bible studies as well as by individual Christians.

Future school leader training

The shortage of principals and leaders in our schools has grown to the point that about one in eight Lutheran elementary schools has a principal vacancy and is operating with an interim plan. Lutheran Schools supports, mentors, and provides training for new and aspiring school leaders through the Director Apprentice Mentoring Program and Principal Training Program and partners with Martin Luther College on the Early Childhood Credential Cohort, Director Training Program, and Principal Credential Cohort. A business certificate program was also launched thanks to grants from the Milwaukee School of Engineering and the Kern Foundation.

WELS chaplain certification

This continuing education initiative is a joint effort of the Commission on Special Ministries and Martin Luther College. It requires ongoing education to renew the certification every three years. In an era of increasing security procedures in institutions, it has become difficult for local pastors to minister in prisons, military bases, and large

health care facilities. Chaplain certification will be increasingly useful, especially if a pastor or layperson wants to reach out to more than one's own members. Online courses are taught through Martin Luther College. For more information, go to wels.net/chaplain-certification-program.

Welcome Home—soul care/elder training

This video-based program is designed to help equip lay leaders of your congregation to identify and reach out to missing members from your church family. The videos are short yet focused and include accompanying guide sheets to facilitate discussion about how to increase the congregation's shepherding activity. *Welcome Home* aims to create a culture within your congregation where it is understood that straying members will be pursued lovingly and aggressively. Creating that culture requires congregational leaders who themselves are strengthened and encouraged for this endeavor. That is why "before" and "after" devotionals are included with every video chapter.

Assistance with special ministry needs

Through its Commission on Special Ministries, Congregational Services aids congregations and individuals as they bring the gospel to those with needs or circumstances that prevent them from being served or serving with their gifts through a congregation's usual ministry.

Military Services

The WELS Military Services Committee provides spiritual services to WELS members and others who serve in the U.S. Armed Forces. The committee carries out its mission through a full-time civilian chaplain in Europe and a national civilian chaplain and liaison to the military who coordinates stateside ministry and communicates with WELS members who are deployed in military service. Go to wels.net/serving-you/christian-life/special-ministries/military-services for more information or to refer a service member so that WELS Military Services might provide spiritual encouragement to that individual.

Prison Ministry

WELS Prison Ministry administers an extensive ministry-by-mail program and provides training opportunities and resources for laypeople and pastors who would like to begin a local jail or prison ministry. Prison Ministry serves 1,500 correctional facilities nationwide. Through a ministry-by-mail program, Prison Ministry has reached more than 70,000 inmates.

Mission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing

WELS Mission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing seeks to help congregations share the gospel of Jesus Christ with members of WELS and others who are deaf or hard of hearing. Addressing the needs of these individuals will improve gospel ministry in worship services and Bible classes.

Mission for the Visually Impaired

The Mission for the Visually Impaired helps people who are unable to read normal-sized print, whether they are blind or have impaired eyesight. The mission produces devotional and other materials in Braille, large print, and online audio files. These materials are distributed free throughout the world to WELS and non-WELS people.

Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Ministry

The Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Ministry promotes and encourages sharing the gospel with those who have special education needs or developmental disabilities. It urges churches to provide a supportive Christian network for people with special needs in our synod and encourages their active participation in the congregation. The ministry develops resources and provides information to parents, caregivers, children, adults, pastors, teachers, and congregations about education programs, mentoring networks, support groups, and printed and digital materials.

Conferences and gatherings

WELS International Youth Rally: "From the Mountaintops"

On June 25–28, 2024, teens from across the country will gather at the foot of the Rocky Mountains to explore the many messages God delivers "from the mountaintops" of Scripture. All the rally's workshops touch on timely teen topics. Performances and recreation are planned with teens in mind. Front and center at the rally—the gospel of Jesus Christ. For the latest information, go to welsyouthrally.net.

WELS Women's Ministry Conference: "Empowered to Proclaim"

This conference will be held July 28–30, 2024, at the Ingleside Hotel in Pewaukee, Wis. A major focus of the conference is the privilege and responsibility Christ gives to all believers to spread the Word. The keynote speakers and breakout

sessions will focus on the work of the Holy Spirit as recorded in Acts and its application to 21st-century Christian women empowered to proclaim the message of Jesus. The breakouts will emphasize growing in faith despite fierce cultural adversity. For the latest information, go to welswmconference.net.

WELS National Conference on Worship, Music, and the Arts: “Sing a New Song to the Lord”

This conference will be held July 30–Aug. 2, 2024. This is one of the largest worship-centric conferences in Lutheranism. However, presentations are not only about worship but also about the intersection of worship with other areas of ministry: evangelism, schools, discipleship, etc. The conference offers 5 concerts and recitals, 5 services, and 61 presentations. The presentations offer content for everyone—not only for pastors and musicians—and for churches of all sizes and circumstances. There are opportunities for participation in a number of choirs, both adult and youth. This conference immediately follows the WELS Women’s Ministry Conference. Those registering for both receive a substantial discount. For the latest information, go to welsworshipconference.net.

Other news

Bryan Gerlach, who has served as the director of WELS Commission on Worship since 1995, has announced his intention to retire this year. He currently serves as the associate director, with his primary focus being on the WELS National Conference on Worship, Music, and the Arts. We thank Gerlach for the three decades of worship leadership, expertise, and encouragement he has provided to WELS. The Conference of Presidents extended a one-year call to Paul Prange to serve as interim director as the Commission on Worship considers several potential initiatives.

A look ahead

WELS Congregational Services will continue to identify common needs within our congregations and schools and produce the resources or programs that help meet those needs. Here are just a few of the resources, efforts, and events being planned that you can look for in the upcoming biennium.

Resources

Schools theology standards and curriculum

Melanie Giddings enters year two of a limited duration part-time call coordinating the work of the WELS Theology Task Force, which plans to complete the framework for a new theology curriculum over the course of the next year. Included in this framework are theology standards. The framework and the standards will help guide curriculum development to meet the needs of children and families being served by our WELS schools today. In addition, both the framework and standards will pave the way for the development of new instructional resources beginning in 2025.

Come and See: Invitational Evangelism Training

Studies show that while Americans increasingly view churches and “organized religion” negatively, they still view Christians fairly positively. Many Americans are open to having discussions about spiritual topics. Most have said they would accept an invitation to visit a worship service when extended by a trusted friend. These resources help congregations to encourage and equip members for invitational evangelism.

WELS teen online Bible study

WELS teens sometimes feel isolated in faith, particularly if there is not enough of a critical mass of teens within the congregation to allow for fellowship and topical study. Beginning this fall, teens are invited to join in a pastor-led virtual Bible study that gathers teens from across the country. The topics will be youth-centric, allowing our teenage brothers and sisters to grow in their faith and connect with fellow believers.

MadeKnown.net

In America, more than one in five members of Generation Z identify as LGBTQ+. WELS also has members struggling with questions about their identity. Many are afraid to speak to a parent, teacher, or pastor. So, the WELS Committee on Identity, Gender, and Sexuality has developed this website. Family members and called workers are able to point to madeknown.net as a place people can go for compassionate truth and helpful resources. The site should be live in time for the WELS International Youth Rally in June.

Iron Sharpens Iron: Creating a Culture of Feedback

This module contains tools and training, helping churches to establish a system where called workers and lay leaders alike seek and receive feedback on ministry efforts.

Local: Creating a congregational presence in your community

The modern “parish area” is typically described as all territory within a 15-minute drive of the congregation. That

is as far as most Americans are willing to drive to attend a church. Yet, in some WELS congregations, the majority of the members live outside that parish area. These resources will help congregations plan how to create a presence in their local communities.

Consultations

Shadow of the Shepherd: The Pastor's Role in Shaping Congregational Culture

A major focus of WELS' next long-range plan is strengthening church culture. Culture is the thought-habits of the individuals within an organization that shape that organization's priorities and efforts. Culture is shaped, to a large degree, by organizational leaders. People in any organization are heavily influenced by what their leaders say and do. This is certainly true of Christian congregations. And no one's shadow is larger in a congregation than the pastor's. This workshop will help pastors understand how they can intentionally shape their congregation's culture in ways beneficial to mission and ministry efforts. Shadow of the Shepherd will be conducted at pastoral conferences, with a launch targeted for late 2024. A subsequent in-congregational follow-up workshop is also being planned.

Everyone Outreach (2.0)

Hoping to reach even more congregations, the Everyone Outreach workshop has been reworked so that congregations can complete it in five hours instead of eight. This new version will begin being offered in fall 2024.

365 Together

This consult has a team from Congregational Services working with a congregation for close to a week. In that time, the team members help the congregation establish or strengthen every critical ministry system: soul care, worship planning, outreach, harvest strategy. The leaders of the church produce a detailed annual ministry plan. For the next 365 days, members of Congregational Service's team will work remotely with members of the congregation in the execution of that ministry plan. 365 Together will launch in spring 2025.

Conferences and gatherings

WELS national education conference

The next education conference will be held in Green Bay, Wis., on June 22–25, 2025. WELS schools have grown by almost 16 percent in the last decade, now serving more than 47,000 students with the gospel on a daily basis. The education conference brings together teachers, principals, pastors, and other school leaders to discuss the challenges and opportunities before our Lutheran high schools, elementary schools, and early childhood ministries. It also provides time for professional growth and the study of pedagogical best practices.

WELS National Conference on Lutheran Leadership

The 2023 leadership conference, held at the Chicago Hilton, brought together more than 1,300 called workers and lay members for encouragement and fellowship, to discuss the big challenges facing our churches, and to examine some best practices for every area of ministry. The next leadership conference will be held in January 2026 in Chicago. Subtitled "Christ through us," this leadership conference will explore some of the themes and goals of WELS' next long-range plan. For the latest information, go to lutheranleadership.com.

Conclusion

In the beginning of this report, we discussed the work that Home Missions, World Missions, and Ministerial Education do *for* you: starting new churches across the country, planting new gospel beachheads around the world, providing called workers. WELS Congregational Services is the ministry group that works *with* you as you proclaim the gospel in your corner of the world. We are thankful for that privilege.

As mentioned previously, this report does not describe everything the six commissions of Congregational Services have done or are doing. For more information, please refer to additional reports at welsconvention.net/rtttd.

Rev. Jonathan Hein, reporter

Rev. Donn Dobberstein, director of WELS Commission on Discipleship

Rev. Joel Gaertner, director of WELS Commission on Special Ministries

Rev. Bryan Gerlach, associate director of WELS Commission on Worship

Rev. Jonathan Hein, coordinator of WELS Congregational Services and director of WELS Commission on Congregational Counseling

Teacher Cindi Holman, coordinator of WELS Early Childhood Ministries

Mr. Dan Nommensen, operations manager for Congregational Services

Teacher Paul Patterson, associate director of WELS Commission on Lutheran Schools
 Rev. Paul Prange, interim director of WELS Commission on Worship
 Teacher James Rademan, associate coordinator of WELS Congregational Services and director of WELS Commission on Lutheran Schools
 Rev. Eric Roecker, director of WELS Commission on Evangelism

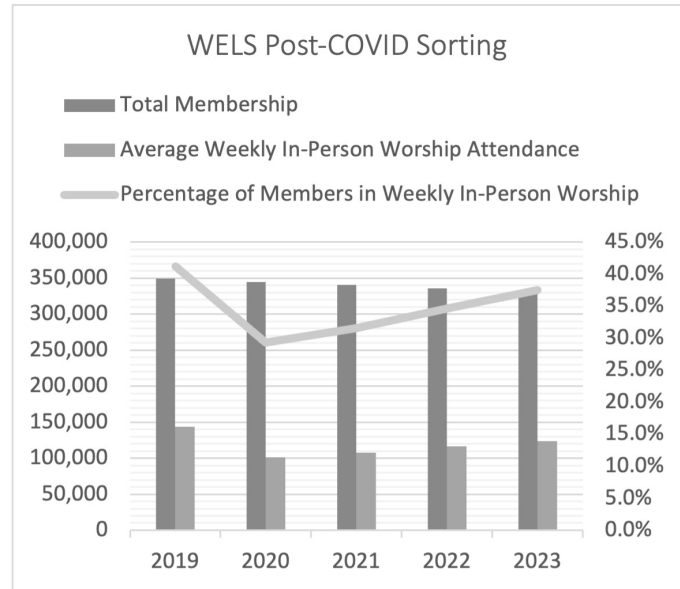
Appendix: 2023 statistical summary highlights

WELS Congregational Services is responsible for collecting and analyzing statistical data within WELS. Here are some notable highlights from 2023.

Continued post-COVID sorting

In 2020, our congregations saw worship and Bible study attendance plummet. For example, from 2019 to 2020, average weekly in-person worship attendance declined by 30 percent (-42,300 souls). Since COVID-19, while WELS total membership continues to trend down, worship and Bible study attendance have risen sharply. Since 2020, WELS total membership is down 4 percent (a loss of 13,600 souls), but weekly in-person worship attendance has risen 22.8 percent (23,000 more worshippers). Adult Bible study has risen 20.6 percent (6,500 more) and Sunday school attendance has risen 6.5 percent (900 more).

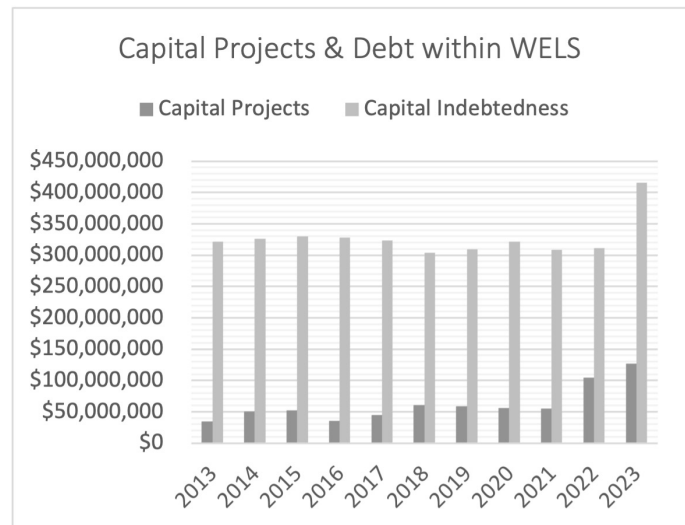
This seems to be continued post-COVID sorting, which is referenced in previous statistical summaries. After COVID-19, many congregations began more intensive shepherding work. As elders and soul care teams contacted absent members, they identified some who had left the church, often prior to COVID-19. Thus, WELS membership continues to trend downward. However, that same shepherding work had the good effect of encouraging others to rejoin in-person worship and Bible study. The percent of WELS members attending in-person weekly worship is close to pre-pandemic levels (41.2 percent in 2019; 37.5 percent in 2023). When you add in the estimated number of WELS members who, for various reasons, utilize the online service in a given week, it seems likely that today more WELS members listen to God’s Word preached weekly than in 2019. Certainly, there is still room for growth. But we thank God for the faithful shepherding, which is bearing fruit.



Debt within WELS congregations

For the second year in a row, WELS congregations spent more than \$100 million on capital projects (\$127 million in 2023). By comparison, the 10-year average is \$55 million spent annually on capital projects. Thus, the total capital indebtedness in WELS congregations rose 33.4 percent last year alone, from \$312 million to \$416 million. The 10-year average for total indebtedness is \$319 million.

This does not count the capital debt carried by WELS area Lutheran high schools. That also rose from \$48 million in 2022 to \$53 million in 2023, a 10.4 percent increase.



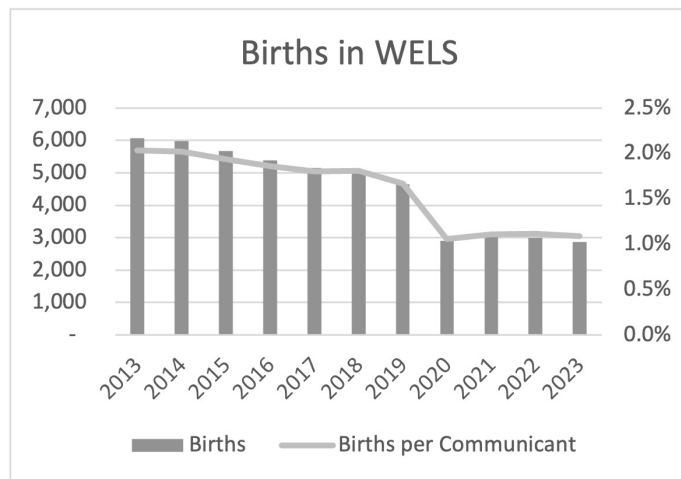
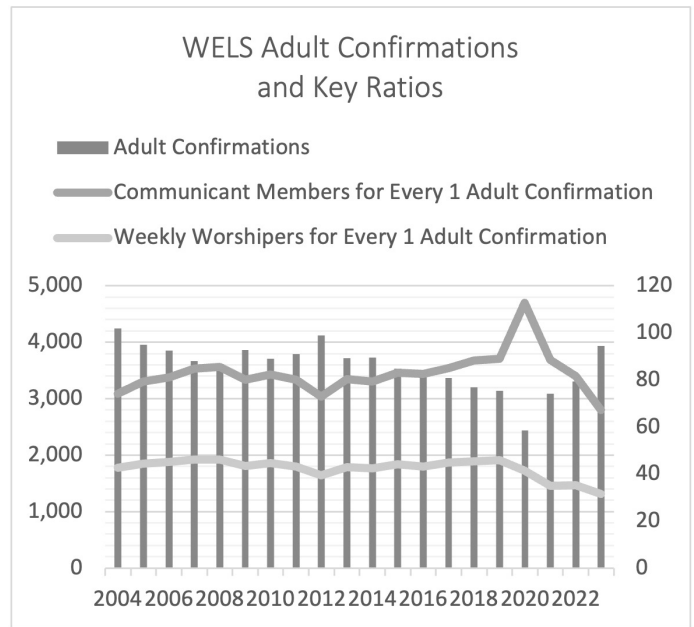
We thank God for the increased ministry opportunities that have led to these capital projects. We note for prayerful consideration that currently, in aggregate, WELS has \$1,800 of debt for each communicant member or \$3,800 in debt for each weekly worshiper.

High adult confirmations

There were 3,932 adult confirmations in WELS in 2023, a 19 percent rise from the previous year and the third-highest total in the past 20 years. (There were 4,123 adult confirmations in 2012 and 4,242 in 2004.) We thank the Lord of the Church that in 2023 two important ratios—adult confirmations to communicant members and adult confirmations to weekly worshippers—reached their best levels in WELS' history. In recent years we have noted that lowering those ratios would be a major factor in curbing WELS' membership losses.

Birth rate decline firmed

The 1980s was the decade when WELS had between 8,000 and 9,000 children born into WELS households annually. A decade ago, it was about 6,000 children born into WELS households. In 2020, births fell more than 30 percent in one year to 2,911. We hoped that would be a one-year anomaly. But we have seen that level hold for four years and even decline more. It is clearly the new normal. When digging into the demographic data, while the fertility rate (i.e., the average number of children born to a woman in her lifetime) in WELS has declined some, that is not the primary cause of the decline in births per communicant. Rather, it is the greying of our communicant membership. Today, WELS has fewer members aged 20 to 38 (the age span of 90 percent of women giving birth) than a decade ago and substantially fewer than two decades ago.



We see this decline slowly working its way into school enrollments. While enrollment in our Lutheran elementary schools is up, the total number of WELS students in our elementary schools is down. (Increased enrollment is due to unchurched and other-churched students.) This will inevitably matriculate upward.

More statistical information and analysis

You can find the full 2023 Statistical Analysis & Summary at welsconvention.net/rtd in June. At welscongregationalservices.net you can find all the data submitted in 2023. It is available in a PDF formatted for print as well as a Microsoft Excel file to allow sorting and queries.

Ministry Support

The Ministry Support area of the ministry financial plan includes the Synodical Council and all entities overseen by the Synodical Council. These include:

Synodical Council

- Expenses for all regular and special meetings of the Synodical Council
- Expenses for the Accounting Oversight Committee
- Some insurance expenses

President's Office

- Compensation for the synod president
- Stipends to the congregations of the first and second vice presidents
- Office staff serving the president and the Synodical Council
- Travel expenses for the synod presidium
- Colloquy expenses

Facility Services

Expenses related to the maintenance and operation of the Center for Mission and Ministry, including insurance costs

WELS Archives

WELS Historical Institute (see p. 115)

WELS Christian Aid and Relief

Expenditures related to humanitarian aid and relief programs; funding for the programs of Christian Aid and Relief is provided by gifts from individuals, congregations, and other organizations

Technology Services

Financial Services

Human Resources

Synodical Council

The Synodical Council (SC) is responsible for the implementation of all decisions and resolutions made by the synod in convention and for overseeing all activities of WELS in pursuit of its mission (other than those that are the specific responsibility of the Conference of Presidents). In keeping with the WELS Constitution and Bylaws, the Synodical Council has the authority to act on behalf of the synod between conventions when proper and necessary. The convention compliance listing is included in this report (p. 42) and provides an updated summary of the progress made to date in implementing the resolutions of the 2023 synod convention.

As it carries out the broad oversight described previously, the Synodical Council is responsible for monitoring, evaluating, and overseeing all programs of ministry carried out by WELS. Part of that oversight is the management of all financial activities of the synod, assuring fiscal soundness, preparing and updating support forecasts, and

monitoring expenditures to maintain a balanced financial plan. In the years when the synod meets in convention, the Synodical Council is responsible for working with all areas of ministry to develop and propose a balanced biennial ministry financial plan (budget) that supports the work of WELS in keeping with its long-range ministry plan.

As it carries out its oversight responsibilities, the Synodical Council receives regular reports from all areas of WELS mission and ministry, including subsidiary organizations and their operational and investment policies.

Standing committees

The Synodical Council is organized into three standing committees. The Finance Committee establishes the support forecast and recommends the overall level of spending for budgetary planning. The Finance Committee also monitors the financial performance and works closely with the WELS chief financial officer to oversee the risk management, banking, and general financial situation of WELS. The Administration Committee develops and implements general policies and procedures; provides oversight of WELS' subsidiary organizations; oversees WELS Human Resources, Communication Services, and Technology; and provides recommendations for WELS called worker compensation (with the input of the Compensation Review Committee). The Ministry Committee oversees and coordinates the plans and activities of all areas of ministry and works to monitor and evaluate how the various areas of ministry are carrying out their tasks in keeping with WELS' long-range ministry plan.

The Finance Committee establishes the recommended spending levels based on the support forecast. The Ministry Committee then determines what portion of available resources are allocated to each area of ministry. This arrangement, in place since 2011, has proven to be very beneficial as the areas of ministry work together cooperatively rather than competitively to allocate the levels of financial support.

The Compensation Review Committee is a standing subcommittee that reports to the Administration Committee. The Compensation Review Committee reviews and recommends adjustments to the WELS compensation guidelines for called workers.

2023 convention compliance

The Synodical Council has the responsibility to monitor compliance to the resolutions passed by the synod in convention. A progress report on convention compliance can be found on p. 42 as Appendix 1.

Long-range plan

The current WELS long-range plan was adopted in 2017 to guide the Synodical Council in its ministry decisions for eight years. That plan comes to an end in 2025. A new long-range plan, under the theme "Christ through us," will be presented to the Synodical Council, and the council will submit its final recommendation to the 2025 synod convention. The committee that is developing the plan will present a progress report to the 2024 district conventions. You can find a brief discussion and outline of the committee's proposed direction as Appendix 2 on p. 43.

Final financial results for the year ending June 30, 2023

In November, the Synodical Council reviewed the financial results of FY23. Results showed great blessings on the financial position of the synod. Those results can be found in the financial section on p. 57.

In April, the Synodical Council also reviewed the financial results for the current year and projections for the coming year. The report from Kyle Egan, WELS' chief financial officer, demonstrated that the synod is in a healthy and strong financial position. That information can also be found on p. 57.

Recent conventions of the synod have passed resolutions encouraging congregations to increase Congregation Mission Offerings (CMO) to meet the ministry needs of the synod. We are happy to report that CMO for calendar year 2023 achieved the fourth consecutive record high and represented the second consecutive calendar year in which CMO exceeded \$23 million. CMO subscriptions for 2024 indicate a continued stability in offerings. We commend God's people of WELS for their faithful support of our synod's mission and ministry.

Annual audit

The independent auditing firm of Baker Tilly LLP (Baker Tilly) conducted annual audits of the consolidated financial statements of WELS, its ministerial education schools, and its support service subsidiaries for the fiscal year ended June 30, 2023. Baker Tilly issued an unmodified opinion (the best possible) on the financial statements and did not identify any significant deficiencies or material weaknesses in internal controls. The Accounting Oversight Committee reviewed the financial statements and the auditor report and recommended approval. The Synodical Council approved these at its November 2023 meeting.

Ministry financial plan for the next biennium

Even though the next ministry financial plan will not be adopted until the 2025 synod convention, work has already begun to develop the plan for FY26/FY27 that will be recommended by the Synodical Council to the convention. A support forecast is developed, which estimates the amount of financial resources that may be conservatively expected to be available to support the various WELS ministries. This forecast takes into consideration the funds available from all sources, including, but not limited to, Congregation Mission Offerings, gifts, grants, bequests, investment income, tuition and student fees, special funds/reserves, and the Financial Stabilization Fund. Based on that forecast and in keeping with Synodical Council policy to maintain the Financial Stabilization Fund within an acceptable range, the Synodical Council recommends overall spending levels, as well as planning assumptions that will be followed (compensation, cost of insurance, retirement benefits, etc.). The support forecast is adjusted periodically, if necessary, to reflect changing financial circumstances.

In developing the ministry financial plan, each area of ministry and synodical department submits its proposed ministry plans and requested operational support, along with planned use of special funds, to the synod president. The president, in view of the established priorities of WELS outlined in the long-range plan, and with input from the areas of ministry and synod departments and subsidiaries, crafts a draft comprehensive ministry financial plan in line with the spending levels recommended by the Synodical Council. The President's Advisory Council, which includes representatives from all synodical areas of ministry and departments, reviews this draft and makes suggestions for modifications. The president, taking into consideration the input of the President's Advisory Council, recommends a complete plan to the Synodical Council. The Finance Committee of the Synodical Council reviews that plan and is tasked with recommending approval of the level of funding that would be provided in the ministry financial plan. The Ministry Committee of the Synodical Council reviews the plan and is tasked with recommending the allocation amounts for all areas of ministry and departments. After discussion and further input, the Synodical Council adopts the plan (or amends it) and forwards it to the synod convention for discussion and approval.

This process has been in place for more than a decade and has served the synod well. All areas of ministry have demonstrated a great deal of brotherly cooperation and the ability to consider the overall needs of the synod.

Synod Capital Projects Fund

In November 2021, the Synodical Council established the Ministry Opportunity Fund through a \$5 million transfer from the Financial Stabilization Fund. The Ministry Opportunity Fund was to be used to expand existing mission and ministry efforts or to address new mission and ministry opportunities that could not be anticipated or otherwise funded. Upon establishment of the Ministry Opportunity Fund, the Synodical Council approved the commitment of the first \$3 million to the WELS Board for Home Missions to help support the 100 Missions in 10 Years initiative.

In April 2023, the Synodical Council voted to dissolve the Ministry Opportunity Fund, distribute the previously identified \$3 million to WELS Board for Home Missions, and allocate the remaining \$2 million to a new Synod Capital Projects Fund. This fund will be used to support the site design and planning costs for the ministerial education schools and to help support possible debt service costs if funds are borrowed for a synod capital project. The Synodical Council also approved a plan to make annual transfers from the Financial Stabilization Fund to the Synod Capital Projects Fund provided that the Financial Stabilization Fund balance levels make that possible and prudent.

Modifications to the current ministry financial plan

The Synodical Council is authorized to make necessary and/or prudent modifications to the ministry financial plan adopted by the synod in convention. WELS entities that desire to exceed approved spending levels (regardless of whether the increase requires additional synod support or adds new staffing beyond what was approved in the ministry financial plan) must submit their request, along with rationale, to the Synodical Council for approval. In the time since the ministry financial plan was adopted, the Synodical Council approved the following modifications, primarily funded with special or reserve funds on hand or because of timing of hiring and savings in other areas. In total, these plan modifications required an increase in synodical support from the WELS operating budget of \$245,000 in FY25.

- **Luther Preparatory School:** \$444,000 expense increase in FY24 primarily for emergency air handler repairs, student union HVAC replacement, elevator repairs, and a fiber optic replacement project and \$100,000 expense increase beginning in FY25 to call a director of ministry relations (1.0 FTE) to improve recruitment efforts
- **Martin Luther College:** \$500,000 increase in use of unrestricted net assets in FY24 primarily due to the impact of lower than planned levels of on-campus enrollment

- **Board for World Missions:** \$180,000 expense increase beginning in FY25 to call two new missionaries to Senegal (2.0 FTE) for exploratory work
- **Board for Home Missions:** \$600,000 expense increase in FY24 due to timing of expenses between years and increasing costs for the 100 Missions in 10 Years initiative
- **Congregational Services:** \$100,000 expense increase beginning in FY25 for a new event manager (1.0 FTE) to coordinate synodical events and conferences
- **Commission on Lutheran Schools:** \$50,000 expense increase beginning in FY25 to transition curriculum coordinator from part time to full time (0.5 FTE)
- **Communication Services:** \$120,000 expense increase beginning in FY25 for the reallocation of current internal staff (1.0 FTE) that supports WELS Church Extension Fund, WELS Investment Funds, and WELS Foundation solely to Communication Services; the addition of a new marketing coordinator (1.0 FTE) to support these support service subsidiaries; and a part-time junior designer (0.5 FTE)
- **Financial Services:** \$75,000 expense increase beginning in FY25 for a new executive assistant (1.0 FTE)
- **Facility Services:** \$50,000 expense increase beginning in FY25 to transition facilities coordinator position from part time to full time (0.5 FTE)
- **Michigan Lutheran Seminary:** \$120,000 expense increase in FY24 for unplanned counseling services, a campus mapping project, new band equipment, choir robes and pianos, updated exterior signage, and various unplanned maintenance projects and \$130,000 expense increase in FY25 for classroom updates, gymnasium floor refinishing, boys' locker room floor replacement, and adding a part-time admissions department assistant (0.5 FTE)

Capital project approval requests

The Synodical Council is authorized to approve capital project requests not originally included within the ministry financial plan adopted by the synod in convention. WELS entities that desire to complete a capital project exceeding \$100,000 that was not previously included in the ministry financial plan must submit their request, along with rationale, to the Synodical Council for approval. In the time since the ministry financial plan was adopted, the Synodical Council approved the following new capital projects funded with special or reserve funds on hand or through savings in other areas. None of them requires an increase in synod support from the WELS operating budget.

Martin Luther College:

- \$250,000 of spending from donor-designated funds to begin the build-out of the lower level of the Chapel of the Christ
- \$800,000 of spending from donor-designated funds for renovations of the restrooms and showers in Centennial Hall
- \$142,000 of spending from the deferral of other projects previously included in the ministry financial plan for the conversion of the existing stormwater pond into a filtration pond
- \$480,000 of spending from the deferral of other projects previously included in the ministry financial plan for the replacement of the existing HVAC system in Old Main

Michigan Lutheran Seminary:

- \$150,000 of spending from donor-designated funds to renovate the dormitory entry and office area

Property sale

The Mission for the Visually Impaired, a ministry of WELS Commission on Special Ministries, had an office condominium in St. Paul, Minn. The condominium was purchased in 2005 with funds provided by both the Mission for the Visually Impaired and WELS Prison Ministry. The condominium was being underutilized, and leaders of Special Ministries and Congregational Services believed that selling the condominium and seeking other local space to rent would be the best way to manage resources. The Mission for the Visually Impaired has identified available space at a nearby congregation where it will carry out its work. In the interest of wise stewardship of resources, the Synodical Council authorized the sale of the condominium in November 2023. In April 2024, the condominium was sold for \$400,000. The net proceeds of the sale were placed into the special funds of Congregational Services to provide support for the Mission for the Visually Impaired and other ministries overseen by Congregational Services.

Appointments

Dustin Schwobe was appointed and Ronald Schmitz and Max Wenck were reappointed to the WELS Investment Funds Board of Directors. Mark Maurice and Mark Schulz were reappointed to the WELS Foundation Board of Directors. Michael Otterstatter was appointed and James Bodendorfer and David Hirons were reappointed to the WELS Church Extension Fund Board of Directors. Jeffrey Verbeke was appointed and Samuel Kruschel was reappointed to the WELS Retirement Program Commission.

Thanks

Three voting members of the Synodical Council are completing their time of service this summer. Steve Hansen (Arizona-California District), Kenneth Gosch (Dakota-Montana District), and Tom Schermerhorn (Northern Wisconsin District) have completed their service on the Synodical Council as lay representatives. We thank them for their faithful service and pray for God's blessings as they continue to serve him.

Rev. Mark Schroeder, reporter

Rev. Mark Schroeder, WELS president and chairman

Mr. Pete Aisbet, Southeastern Wisconsin District

Rev. Matthew Brown, chairman of WELS Board for Home Missions

Mr. John Fowler, South Atlantic District

Mr. Kenneth Gosch, Dakota-Montana District

Mr. Steven Hansen, Arizona-California District

Rev. Joel Heckendorf, pastor-at-large

Rev. Philip Hirsch, Conference of Presidents

Rev. Joel Jenswold, pastor-at-large

Mr. Chris Kestner, Michigan District

Mr. Jake Lemke, Western Wisconsin District

Mr. Brent Masters, Pacific Northwest District

Mr. Brent Nemmers, South Central District

Dr. Ryan Olson, North Atlantic District

Teacher Thomas Plitzuweit, teacher-at-large

Rev. Duane Rodewald, chairman of WELS Board for Ministerial Education

Mr. Kurt Sames, Minnesota District

Mr. Thomas Schermerhorn, Northern Wisconsin District

Rev. Jonathan Schroeder, chairman of WELS Board for World Missions

Rev. Charles Westra, Conference of Presidents

Mr. Chip Woods, Nebraska District

Rev. Joel Zank, Conference of Presidents

Advisory:

Mr. Kyle Egan, WELS chief financial officer and treasurer

Rev. Mark Gabb, administrator of WELS Board for Home Missions

Rev. Jonathan Hein, coordinator of WELS Congregational Services

Mr. Lee Hitter, director of WELS Communication Services

Rev. James Huebner, WELS first vice president

Rev. Kurt Lueneburg, director of WELS Ministry of Christian Giving

Mr. Dennis Maurer, director of WELS Human Resources

Rev. Paul Prange, administrator of WELS Board for Ministerial Education

Teacher Jim Rademan, associate coordinator of WELS Congregational Services

Rev. Larry M. Schlomer, administrator of WELS Board for World Missions

Mr. Martin Spriggs, WELS chief technology officer

Rev. Joel Voss, WELS second vice president (serves as the secretary of the Synodical Council)

Mr. Sean Young, senior director of WELS Missions Operations

Appendix 1: 2023 WELS convention compliance listing

Resolution or report	Responsible group/individual	Resolution description	Status:
2021 Res. 16-01	Northwestern Publishing House (NPH)	Encourage NPH to pursue completion of the Theology Curriculum Project for K-12 schools	<i>Proposal was given to the Conference of Presidents for supervision of the project; COP appointed a committee, which has begun its work</i>
2023 Res. 01-03 and 01-04	Synod President	Appoint a task force to study the shortage of called workers and address challenges to recruitment for WELS ministerial education schools	<i>Task force appointed and functioning</i>
2023 Res. 02-02	Conference of Presidents (COP)	2025 synod convention to be held at Martin Luther College	<i>Planning underway</i>
2023 Res. 02-03	Conference of Presidents	COP to prepare a pastoral brief on “the importance of justice and analyzing critical theories in light of Scripture	<i>Committee appointed to assist the COP in preparing a pastoral brief</i>
2023 Res. 03-01	Commission on Inter-Church Relations (CICR)	Affirm fellowship with <i>Iglesia Cristo WELS Internacional</i>	<i>Fellowship affirmed by convention</i>
2023 Res. 03-02	CICR	Declare fellowship with the Obadiah Lutheran Synod -- Uganda	<i>Fellowship declared by convention and implemented</i>
2023 Res. 03-03	CICR	Informal discussions with Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod LCMS	<i>Informal discussions are continuing and will next take place in December 2024; information and updates will be provided to WELS members</i>
2023 Res. 07-01	Synodical Council	Ministry financial plan	<i>Plan approved and implemented</i>
2023 Res. 10-01	Martin Luther College and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary	Encouragement to MLC and WLS to explore opportunities to enroll non-traditional students for ministry training	<i>Currently ongoing</i>
2023 Res. 18-01, 18-02, 18-03	Synod President	Revisions to the synod bylaws	<i>Completed</i>

Appendix 2: WELS' next strategic plan: "Christ through us"

And [God] has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:19-21)

In 2025, WELS will celebrate its 175th anniversary. The theme for that celebration is "Christ through us." We will thank God for the grace he has shown our church body for seven generations. In that time, through Word and sacrament, we have received Christ's righteousness as a gift. In that time, through us, God has shared the message of reconciliation all around the globe. For more information about various aspects of that special celebration, see p. 12. However, under that theme "Christ through us," we will not just look back at the past seven generations of WELS but look forward to the eighth.

We are at a critical juncture in WELS' history. Most everyone is aware of the challenges. Americans are increasingly walking away from church. In almost every denomination, church membership is way down. Likewise, churches and Christian schools are challenged to find workers. In WELS, there is the added challenge of births plummeting from more than 7,000 less than 20 years ago to less than 3,000 in the past few years. At next year's synod convention, the "Christ through us" strategic plan will look at what we pray Christ might do through us to meet those challenges.

WELS has produced long-range plans in the past. What will be different about "Christ through us"?

First, past long-range plans established objectives for the areas of ministry within synod: Home Missions, World Missions, Ministerial Education, etc. There were things for those areas of ministry to do. The only responsibility for congregations and members was to support that long-range plan with their prayers and offerings. "Christ through us" will indeed establish bold objectives for our synod.

- We pray that through us, Christ establishes 100 new home missions—new gospel beachheads all over the country.
- We pray that through us, Christ allows us to increase our confessional Lutheran footprint worldwide, so that in one decade we might have one million souls in our greater fellowship.
- We pray that through us, Christ continues to expand the pipelines by which people might enter the ministry, so that we might have the called workers to meet the opportunities before our churches and schools.

However, the "Christ through us" plan will also ask congregations to establish local objectives that align with our larger shared mission efforts:

- increasing evangelism efforts as much as humanly possible, including by implementing a zealous harvest strategy in every WELS school and early childhood ministry;
- helping restore the family altar as a cornerstone of whole-life discipleship; and
- discussing partnering with other congregations in nearby geographic proximity in an effort to achieve a greater critical mass, enabling more gospel ministry.

"Christ through us" will ask every WELS individual to consider what he or she can do personally to help share the message of reconciliation as an ambassador of Christ. The "us" in that theme is "all of us."

Second, past long-range plans have laid out strategies and tactics. "Christ through us" will do that but also have a heavy emphasis on congregational and synodical culture. Culture can be viewed as the shared thought habits that frame the way that group of people behave and work. There can be healthy aspects of congregational culture: gospel confidence, where members trust God will accomplish what he wants through his Word; selflessness, where members prioritize the needs of others above their own personal preferences; courageousness, where members are willing to engage in ministry activities that might be personally uncomfortable, because they understand those activities are vital to Christ's mission. However, there are also unhealthy aspects of congregational culture: an inward focus, where there is an abundance of ministry to serve the needs of members but little to no effort put into reaching the lost; a status quo mentality, where members refuse to assess ministry efforts and attempt to improve them. A healthy congregational culture provides the best opportunity for a congregation to carry out its ministry plan with joy and zeal. An unhealthy congregational culture undermines those plans.

The “Christ through us” plan will identify what we believe are needed cultural shifts in our church. One simple example of a needed shift in WELS’ thought habits: *from* thinking of outreach as something that is best accomplished through congregational programs *to* thinking of outreach as something that is best accomplished by WELS believers intentionally developing relationships with unbelievers and unchurched and then sharing the hope Christ provides when the opportunity inevitably arises. “Christ through us” will share a number of important *From-To* statements. Moreover, it will include programs that equip congregational leaders to assess their culture as well as better understand how to shift congregational culture in order to better support the mission Jesus gave the Church (e.g., the Shadow of the Shepherd program referenced on p. 33 in the Congregational Services report).

The challenges before our churches are great. But so are the opportunities. It is not a coincidence that at the same time American Christianity has collapsed, depression, anxiety, and tensions have spiked. People are starving for relief but do not know what will provide it. We do. Around the world, barriers to gospel ministry are falling. Who has the Word in its truth and purity, a treasure to share with every nation, tribe, language, and people? We do.

The “Christ through us” strategic plan acknowledges that the work of building the Church belongs entirely to Christ. However, Christ chooses to do that work through us. So, we shall establish bold objectives. We shall pray for the strength to carry them out. And we shall leave the results of that work up to Jesus Christ.

WELS Long-Range Planning Task Force

Rev. Mark Gabb, administrator of WELS Board for Home Missions

Rev. Jonathan Hein, coordinator of WELS Congregational Services

Mr. Lee Hitter, director of WELS Communication Services

Rev. James Huebner, WELS first vice president

Mr. Kurt Nitz, member of WELS Commission on Congregational Counseling

Rev. Paul Prange, administrator of WELS Board for Ministerial Education

Rev. Larry M. Schlomer, administrator of WELS Board for World Missions

Mr. Martin Spriggs, WELS chief technology officer

Mr. Sean Young, senior director of WELS Missions Operations

Accounting Oversight Committee

Our calling

The Accounting Oversight Committee serves WELS and its ministerial education schools, subsidiaries, and affiliates that are under the oversight of the Synodical Council. The committee serves the Synodical Council by assisting management with ensuring appropriate accounting policies and internal controls are established and financial systems are efficient and effective; retaining external auditors; assisting in ensuring that financial personnel have the requisite skills; and assisting in ensuring that financial reports are prepared timely, accurately, and in compliance with accounting principles generally accepted in the United States of America (U.S. GAAP).

The Accounting Oversight Committee keeps the Synodical Council informed of its action through the Synodical Council’s appointed member of the committee. The synod’s ministerial education schools and its subsidiary and affiliate boards, commissions, and committees are informed through WELS’ chief financial officer and treasurer.

Our current situation

The Accounting Oversight Committee engaged the independent audit firm of Baker Tilly US, LLP (Baker Tilly), to conduct the annual audits of the consolidated financial statements of WELS, its ministerial education schools, and its support service subsidiaries for the fiscal year ended June 30, 2023. All of the audits were completed within four months of the fiscal year end (consistent with historical precedent), with all entities receiving an unmodified opinion—the best you can get—on the financial statements’ compliance with U.S. GAAP. In addition, the auditors did not identify any significant deficiencies or material weaknesses in internal controls. Copies of the annual financial

statements, quarterly consolidated financial statements, and quarterly budget reports are available on WELS Financial Services' site at wels365.sharepoint.com/sites/finance/SitePages/Home.aspx.

WELS successfully implemented new accounting guidance changes issued by the Financial Accounting Standards Board (FASB) related to leases for the fiscal year ended June 30, 2023. The adoption of the new leasing standard did not have a significant impact on the consolidated financial statements of WELS, its ministerial education schools, or its support service subsidiaries.

In addition to the annual WELS financial statement audits, the Accounting Oversight Committee also engaged Baker Tilly to audit the WELS VEBA Group Health Plan and WELS Pension Plan for calendar year 2023. These financial statements received unmodified opinions for 2022, and the auditors did not identify any significant deficiencies or material weaknesses in internal controls. The 2023 calendar year audits for these two entities won't be available until summer 2024 and are expected to be similar to prior years' results.

A look ahead

The Accounting Oversight Committee will work with WELS Financial Services in assessing the impacts of new accounting guidance issued by the FASB related to credit losses. In addition, the latest agreement for audit services with Baker Tilly is expiring following the fiscal year 2024 audits. The Accounting Oversight Committee will help to assess the strategy for either renewing services with Baker Tilly or transitioning to a new accounting firm. Part of this assessment will also include the consideration for whether some sort of limited scope procedures or a full financial statement audit should be performed on the WELS Shepherd Plan. An audit of the Shepherd Plan is not required as the plan is not subject to the provisions of the Employee Retirement Income Security Act of 1974, as amended (ERISA). In previous years, a review of the Shepherd Plans' controls was conducted with the assistance of Baker Tilly, the plan advisor and third-party administrator, noting that the control environment is strong and steps have been taken to inform participating entities of their responsibilities.

Mr. William Schultz, reporter

Mr. William Schultz, chairman

Mr. Todd Backus

Mr. Jeffrey Fisher

Mr. David Maccoux

Mr. Daniel Riebe

Mr. Kevin Rusch

Mr. Thomas Schermerhorn, Synodical Council liaison

Advisory:

Mr. Kyle Egan, WELS chief financial officer and treasurer

WELS Archives

Our calling

The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives is the official repository of the permanent records of WELS and its congregations, called workers, and WELS-affiliated ministries. These permanent records are those of significant historical value for the synod and its congregations, and they document all aspects of WELS administration, mission, and ministry. The mission of the archives is to preserve and protect these records and make them available for researchers as well as provide information services to the synod and its called workers and congregations.

Our current situation

During 2023 the archives hosted numerous volunteers, researchers, and tours. The volunteers who graciously give of their time to assist in the archives are an incredible blessing. With their help, work progressed on many collections

including the Nebraska District collection, congregational collections, the *Christian Worship* 2021 Hymnal Committee collection, and numerous others. Prof. J. P. Koehler's index of Early Presidential Letters continues to be cross-referenced with the full inventory of this collection and the final reconciliation appears in the archives' online catalog. A full inventory of the congregational files found in the archives was completed in 2023 and is used as a reference point for numerous research requests. Initial preservation and rehousing was finished on some of the oldest district materials in the collection. Work will begin on a full inventory of this material before adding it to the online catalog.

The digital collection continues to grow as more material is requested. One area where the archives experienced great growth in the digital collection was in our digital image collection. Work on a pictorial history to be published for the synod's 175th anniversary prompted a call for submissions of historical photos from individuals within our synod. These images have been added to the growing digital image collection in the archives. Also, in preparation for the 175th anniversary, a seminary student was hired as an intern over the summer in 2023. His task was identifying and digitizing historical photos held within the archives collection. With the help of the seminary library, digitization has resumed on *The Gemeinde-Blatt*. These digital issues reside on the Essay File, which is found on the seminary's website at wisluthsem.org.

In 2023, 20 tour groups came to the WELS Center for Mission and Ministry. Most of these tours were small groups, but several school and congregational groups toured as well. Along with these tours, the archives had 40 in-person research appointments throughout 2023. As of writing this in early 2024, 6 in-person research appointments have already taken place. During 2023 the archives received just over 140 research requests. These requests covered topics from genealogical research to congregations preparing to celebrate major anniversaries. Several scholarly research projects are utilizing the archives for research. Along with these research requests, the archivist also consulted on a variety of projects this last year including assisting congregations with anniversary projects and meeting with congregations concerned with preserving their own archives.

The archives continue to be a repository for church records of congregations that have closed. In 2023 the archives received the records of three congregations that closed, as well as other accruals to existing collections such as the congregational and biographical files. A large donation of material relating to the Colorado District Mission Board was added into the archives in the last year. As donations continue to come in, priority of collections to catalog continues to be re-evaluated.

This past year the archives had a joint table with WELS Historical Institute at numerous conferences and events including the 2023 WELS National Conference on Lutheran Leadership, the annual Mission and Ministry event at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, the 2023 Lutheran Women's Missionary Society Convention, and the 2023 synod convention. The archives also hosted a table for the first time at the Wisconsin Lutheran State Teachers' Conference held at Wisconsin Lutheran High School in October 2023. Each of these events offered the opportunity to reach out to distinct groups within our synod. In late fall 2023, the archivist spoke to the senior church history students at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. This presentation focused on how the archives can assist them in their future ministries and how they, in turn, can support the archives.

A look ahead

The day-to-day work taking place in the archives will continue in much the same way in the next year. Reconciling Koehler's index with the Early Presidential Collection will continue in the online catalog, as will cataloging on other collections. Processing work on donations will progress to make those collections available for research in a timely manner. Fulfillment of research requests will be a high priority in the coming year. As more complex research requests are received, the amount of time it takes to gather the needed information increases. With the help of volunteers and more detailed catalog records, it is hoped that the amount of time spent on fulfilling each request will decrease.

A variety of outreach opportunities are available in the next year including the Lutheran Women's Missionary Society Convention in Sioux Falls, S.D.; the Southeastern Wisconsin District Convention in Milwaukee, Wis.; the WELS Women's Ministry Conference in Pewaukee, Wis.; and the national worship conference in Kenosha, Wis. In October, the archivist is planning to attend the Lutheran Historical Conference Biennial Meeting held in Baltimore, Md. This conference takes place every two years and is a fantastic opportunity to meet with other Lutheran historians and archivists.

As the 175th anniversary of the synod approaches, projects relating to the anniversary will continue to receive high priority. The archivist continues to serve on the anniversary committee and prioritizes the work in the archives according to the needs of the 175th anniversary. The committee has numerous resources planned that will provide

teachers and pastors the tools to help teach synod history, including a pictorial history, a digital timeline, and a video vignette series. With the approaching 175th anniversary, the opportunity is presented for us to look back with thanksgiving at all the blessings God has graciously granted our synod.

Mrs. Susan Willems, reporter

WELS Christian Aid and Relief

Our calling

WELS Christian Aid and Relief is one of our synod's ministries of compassion, also known as "mercy ministry." Our mission is to reflect Christ's love and compassion to people suffering as the result of disasters or other hardships. The theme passage that guides the ministry of Christian Aid and Relief is Galatians 6:20: "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers." We carry out our mission through three main activities:

- **Disaster relief:** When a disaster—tornado, hurricane, fire, flood, etc.—strikes a community where we have a WELS congregation or home or world mission, we work together with that congregation or mission to bring relief to those impacted. We do this by providing funding, leadership, logistics, and trained volunteer labor to help the congregation and community restore and rebuild. Disasters not only damage and destroy buildings and infrastructure, but they also often traumatize people. For this reason, we strive to give careful attention to the people impacted by a disaster. We are careful to listen to their stories, pray with them, and share with them the comfort of a Savior who loves them.
- **Humanitarian aid:** Working together with our partners in WELS Home and World Missions, we provide basic needs to people in our mission fields here in America and all over the world. Food for the hungry, clean water for the thirsty, medicine and medical care for the sick and dying, mosquito netting for those who live in areas where malaria is a problem, and schools supplies for underprivileged kids are just a few examples of the basic needs provided through our humanitarian aid program. One wonderful result of sharing such care and compassion is that it builds trust between our missionaries and the people in their mission field. This in turn leads to many opportunities to proclaim the good news of the One in whose name we show such compassion.
- **Personal relief grants:** Sometimes a member or prospective member of one of our congregations faces a crisis, usually financial or medical in nature, that is too big for the congregation to provide all the help that is needed. In such cases, when invited, we work together with the congregation to make sure that the need is met. In this way, we help congregations to help those in need, "especially those who belong to the family of believers."

Our current situation

Financial matters

From Jan. 1 through Dec. 31, 2023, WELS Christian Aid and Relief utilized \$497,608 of the gifts entrusted to us for foreign and domestic disaster relief. Humanitarian aid projects in WELS mission fields at home and abroad were supported with \$535,017. Personal relief grants amounting to \$323,421 were given to assist WELS members and prospects experiencing severe financial or medical crises.

Disaster relief

WELS Christian Aid and Relief provides disaster relief in a variety of situations and in a variety of ways. When a major disaster causes extensive damage and disruption in a community where we have a congregation, we often mobilize and deploy volunteers for onsite disaster relief operations. We go in and help the church and community to clean up after the disaster. When a disaster strikes in an area where there is no WELS ministry close by, we often work through Direct Relief to provide grants to assist the survivors of the disaster. Direct Relief specializes in providing medical assistance in the form of equipment, medications, and other medical supplies.

The past two years have been somewhat quiet on the disaster relief front with only one disaster relief deployment. Here is a summary of our disaster relief activities over the past two years:

- Hurricane Ian, a destructive category 4 storm, made landfall on the southwest coast of Florida on Sept. 28, 2022. This powerful storm caused more than \$120 billion in damage. Sadly, more than 140 people lost their lives. Thankfully, none of our WELS members were killed, but many had extensive damage to their homes and property. Five of our congregations were also seriously damaged, requiring thousands of dollars in repairs. WELS Christian Aid and Relief deployed volunteers to assist with cleanup and repairs. This deployment was conducted in partnership with Builders for Christ, using Prince of Peace in Englewood, Fla., as home base. Much work was accomplished, and much gospel comfort was brought to those who were hurting. WELS members generously supported this effort with more than \$300,000 in special gifts of love.
- On Feb. 6, 2023, a devastating 7.8 magnitude earthquake struck Syria and Turkey, causing billions of dollars in damage and more than 60,000 deaths. Since it is not possible for WELS Christian Aid and Relief to deploy disaster relief operations in that part of the world, we turned to our longtime partner, Direct Relief. The generosity of God's people in WELS enabled us to channel \$20,000 in gifts through Direct Relief to bring vital medical aid to many who are suffering because of this terrible disaster.
- WELS Christian Aid and Relief, in partnership with WELS World Missions, has provided disaster relief funding to help relieve the suffering of pastoral students in Vietnam impacted by COVID-19 and people devastated by flooding in Pakistan, cyclones in Bangladesh, and earthquakes and a war in south Asia. We also facilitated moving refugees from war-torn Sudan across the border into Uganda and helped rebuild churches in Malawi and Zambia destroyed by cyclones. WELS Christian Aid and Relief also provided funding for several individuals and congregations, at home and abroad, impacted by fires and other minor disasters.
- In October 2021, WELS Christian Aid and Relief formed a Disaster Relief Task Force made up of both called workers and laypeople whose task is to expand and improve Christian Aid and Relief's disaster relief capabilities. The members of the task force are Dan Sims, director of WELS Christian Aid and Relief; Tom Spiegelberg; Wayne Halldorson; Bryan Gran; Ron Kerr; Jim Bublitz; and Elizabeth Zambo, Christian Aid and Relief's administrative assistant. The task force is currently working on researching best practices for disaster relief; writing a disaster relief field operations manual; developing volunteer training procedures; and identifying WELS members who have the training, background, and experience to help lead disaster relief deployments. In addition, a new disaster relief website has been launched at welsdisasterrelief.org. This website includes powerful software to help us manage and communicate with our corps of disaster relief volunteers and to connect them to disaster relief opportunities.

Humanitarian aid

WELS Christian Aid and Relief is privileged to partner with WELS Home and World Missions to provide basic needs to people in the mission fields we serve through our humanitarian aid program. For fiscal year 2023–24, more than \$700,000 was approved for this effort, a new record! These grants fund projects such as food distribution for the poor, free health clinics, lunch packs for breastfeeding mothers, sewing classes, winter fuel for refugees and orphans, smokeless stoves, backpacks and school supplies for underprivileged children, support for legal immigrants, food for the hungry, clean water for the thirsty, and many other examples. This work is happening all over the world in places like Malawi, Zambia, Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, Indonesia, Albania, Mexico, Canada, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and right here in the United States. These projects provide our home and world missionaries an opportunity to connect in a meaningful way with the people in our mission fields by showing them the love and compassion of Christ. This, in turn, leads to many opportunities to share the reason for the hope that we have in our Savior.

Community Care and Compassion Matching Grants Program

This program provides matching grants of up to \$2,500 for self-supporting WELS congregations that submit an approved plan to carry out compassion ministry in their community. (WELS mission congregations are not eligible but may take advantage of our humanitarian aid program.) The goal of this program is to encourage WELS congregations to reach out to those in their community who are hurting, help them with their needs, build relationships with them, and share with them the good news of the One who cares for our every need. More information about this program and an application form can be found at wels.net/relief.

Personal relief grants

WELS Christian Aid and Relief continues to assist WELS congregations as they support their members and prospects who are dealing with serious financial or medical crises. We are here to help! Pastors are encouraged to reach out to the director of WELS Christian Aid and Relief should a need arise in their congregation.

A look ahead

A major goal for the next biennium is to complete the overhaul of our disaster relief program. We hope to have

more trained leaders ready to serve, a database of useful disaster relief and congregational preparedness materials available, and our disaster relief website operating smoothly to manage disaster deployment opportunities.

WELS Christian Aid and Relief is always looking for ways to improve communication to WELS members. Through printed updates; videos; social media posts; and visits to congregations, schools, and groups, we strive to educate people about our work and to let those who support this ministry see firsthand how their gifts are being used. More information can be found at wels.net/relief or on our Facebook page. In addition, our webpage provides a convenient way to make an online donation toward Christian Aid and Relief projects (wels.net/cargift). Commission members also make presentations to various church and school groups to “tell our stories” and inform WELS members about the needs and opportunities to help people through Christian Aid and Relief. Contact us to learn more.

Thank you

We are grateful to our compassionate Lord for moving the hearts of WELS members to show how much they care for those who are hurting by offering both prayers and generous financial gifts. We are also grateful for our disaster relief volunteers who give their time, effort, and energy to help those in need. To God alone be all the glory!

Rev. Daniel Sims, reporter

Rev. Thomas Spiegelberg II, chairman

Rev. Curt Backhaus

Rev. Paul Biedenbender

Mr. Dennis Palmberg

Teacher Steven Vasold

Advisory:

Rev. Daniel Sims, director of WELS Christian Aid and Relief

Mrs. Elizabeth Zambo, administrative assistant

Support Services

Support Services is the area that encompasses Technology, Financial Services, Human Resources, and Facility Services. These areas support the ministry of the synod and its four ministerial education schools.

Technology

Our calling

WELS Technology supports the synod’s mission, providing a robust technical infrastructure; developing modern applications; facilitating digital communications; and assisting churches, congregations, and called workers in harnessing technology to spread the gospel. Our dedicated team of professionals embraces the challenge of leveraging the tools of the 21st century to further God’s kingdom. Time and resources are set aside to help make technologies available to those who want to share the good news by “any means possible.” Our calling is to find those intersections between technology and ministry.

Our current situation

This past year has been marked by significant progress and achievements for WELS Technology. Our team has undertaken numerous initiatives, all aimed at enhancing the ministry efforts of the synod and its constituent entities.

In the ever-evolving landscape of cybersecurity threats, the WELS Technology Information Services team has prioritized the protection of synod assets. Security personnel have worked diligently to ensure the integrity of our systems and data, implementing best practices and conducting regular audits. To ensure protection, several measures have been implemented:

- **In-house network penetration testing:** Regular testing for vulnerabilities in the internal network to identify and address potential risks.
- **Multi-factor authentication:** Additional layers of security are implemented through multi-factor authentication, requiring multiple forms of identification for access to sensitive systems.
- **Security camera installation:** Motion-activated security cameras monitor critical areas, recording incidents for review and evidence.
- **Firewall upgrade:** Hardware and software firewalls have been upgraded to provide robust protection against unauthorized access and cyber threats.
- **Center for Internet Security (CIS) products:** Evaluation and implementation of CIS SecureSuite products for security analysis and risk mitigation at the Center for Mission and Ministry and all four ministerial education schools.
- **Password management solution:** A new password management solution has been implemented to enhance password security and simplify password management.
- **Technology inventory control system:** A system is now in place to record and track all technology hardware, including purchasing information, enabling better asset management and security control.

WELS is committed to protecting the sensitive information it collects from donors and other individuals. The synod maintains compliance with PCI and GDPR (General Data Protection Regulations) to safeguard financial information, credit card data, and other sensitive data. WELS also works closely with its synod schools to ensure compliance with prevailing security regulations.

Sensitive data about donors and other individuals is stored in secure databases operated by WELS. To date, no information housed in synod-owned and operated databases has ever been compromised.

In search of improved cost control and licensing options, WELS Technology has transitioned to a new Microsoft licensing vendor. This partnership will ensure that we continue to access the latest software tools at the most competitive rates.

The WELS Web Services team has been involved in several recent website projects. These include

- an event site for WELS National Conference on Worship, Music, and the Arts, **welsworshipconference.net**;
- an event site for WELS International Youth Rally, **welsyouthrally.net**;
- an event site for WELS Women's Ministry Conference, **welswmconference.net**;
- Gospel Hands, an online religious sign language video dictionary for the deaf and interpreters to share the gospel, **gospelhands.net**;
- a splash page for an upcoming website that will share resources and support channels around LGBTQ+ topics approached from a Lutheran worldview, **madeknown.net**; and
- a new e-commerce website to replace Lutheran Schools' current subscription solution.

The Software Services team builds applications for areas of ministry to collect, analyze, maintain, and report on synod data. This includes information on called workers, churches, and schools necessary to maintain an accurate yearbook, create call lists, manage benefits, and inform resource allocation decisions. The team has completed a number of key projects in 2023 and 2024, including:

- **Data quality dashboards:** Reports and dashboards are now available to Center for Mission and Ministry data stewards to identify potential problems with incomplete or inaccurate data in the WELSource system. These dashboards are used to prioritize process improvements, ensuring excellent data quality for decision making.
- **My WELS Cloud sign-in research:** This project is for researching and prototyping various products and methods of authenticating and authorizing users, with the goal of removing @wels.net addresses as the primary sign-in method and permitting user-selected credentials.
- **WELSource Soul:** Completed the migration of the "soul" application, which maintains the synod's called worker and Benefit Plans Office data. This effort migrated from a legacy application to a modern application and platform. In addition, the project included many updates to improve efficiency and data accuracy.

- **WELSource District:** The district application maintains the synod’s district, conference, and circuit data. Completing this project included a migration from a legacy application to a modern application and platform. Outstanding improvement requests were also released, not allowed in the legacy application.

A look ahead

As we look to the future, WELS Technology is committed to maintaining a forward-thinking approach.

Web redevelopment

To address the expanding growth of our WELS Web portfolio and an overabundance of digital contacts and communications, Web Services and Communication Services have teamed up with two solutions experts. We’ve completed the discovery and planning phases and are progressing toward final vendor and product selection. Our goal is to provide greater audience engagement, a wider scope of analytics, a unified contact management system, and automated workflows to gain a richer experience/engagement for digital visitors that will connect them with ministry opportunities.

The Web Services team identified several opportunities and challenges related to its 52 web properties, including

- declining traffic statistics due to changes in Google’s algorithm;
- the need to enhance searchability and reach; and
- the need to reorganize and revamp the WELS portfolio of websites to focus on three main audiences: WELS members, leaders, and those who don’t know Jesus yet.

To address these challenges, the team is working on several projects, including

- researching and prototyping various products and methods of authenticating and authorizing users to improve the experience of logging into My WELS Cloud applications;
- reorganizing and revamping the WELS portfolio of websites to improve content organization, infrastructure, content delivery, search, branding, and design; and
- evaluating customer relationship management platform solutions.

Enhanced campus security

We will continue to invest in the security of our synod schools, working with each institution to conduct regular audits and develop comprehensive roadmaps for addressing any identified vulnerabilities.

The next generation call report

This project includes the migration of the call report from the legacy system to modern application architecture and infrastructure. The project is split into phases focusing first on migration and then process improvements. The project’s goals include improved communications between areas of ministry, time savings, and a better experience for the end user. The last phase of this project will focus on a new public report that allows public users to perform search functionality.

Campus Ministry

The WELS Campus Ministry Committee requested several improvements to the Campus Ministry System. The focus of the project is to improve the registration process for the student, improve administrative functions for the campus ministry pastors and staff, update training materials, and provide access to a test environment for committee members to test new features.

Cloud migration

We will continue to leverage the benefits of cloud computing by migrating key synod infrastructure and applications to the Microsoft Azure environment. This move will enhance flexibility, scalability, and security.

Education and training

WELS Technology recognizes the importance of ongoing education and skills development. We have conducted numerous workshops and presentations, covering topics such as:

- **Enhancing ministry with technology: Personal knowledge management**—This half-day workshop helps called workers to use technology to build a knowledge management system, which helps organize information/knowledge and promote better retrieval for future creative work.
- **Enhancing ministry with technology: Project management**—This half- or full-day workshop helps workers

understand the basic building blocks of managing ministry projects successfully. It addresses communication, volunteers, tracking, task management, and getting projects “unstuck.”

- **Enhancing ministry with technology: Personal productivity**—This full-day workshop helps called workers build a productivity system that includes e-mail, document, task, communication, and calendar management.
- **Working genius assessments**—This assessment from the Table Group allows ministry teams to identify their “geniuses” (or gifts) to maximize productivity, build effective teams, lead better meetings, and create better working environments.

These workshops have helped our called workers and ministry teams to leverage technology effectively in their ministries. Please contact Martin Spriggs at martin.spriggs@wels.net if you’d like any of these workshops presented at your location, event, or conference.

Conclusion

The WELS Technology team is deeply grateful for the opportunity to serve the synod and its mission. We remain committed to providing innovative solutions, unwavering security, and support to all those who proclaim the gospel message. As technology continues to shape our world, we stand ready to embrace its possibilities and use them to spread the love of Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth.

Mr. Martin Spriggs, reporter

Financial Services

Our calling

Financial Services prepares and provides accounting and financial information and services that support and serve WELS ministries. This is done by providing timely, accurate, and complete financial statements, reports, and analyses. These reports facilitate ministry by providing God-pleasing, efficient, and effective financial services and operations that are in accordance with policies, procedures, and regulations. Financial Services also designs, implements, and maintains internal control systems that safeguard the assets God has provided.

Financial Services is led by the WELS chief financial officer (CFO) and generally provides the following services to WELS, WELS Church Extension Fund (CEF), WELS Foundation, WELS Investment Funds (WIF), WELS Historical Institute, WELS Retirement Program Commission, and WELS Voluntary Employee Benefits Association (VEBA) Commission:

- financial planning and forecasting;
- accounting and auditing services, including financial statement preparation;
- transaction processing, including gifts, accounts payable, and accounts receivable;
- special funds accounting;
- financial analysis and reporting;
- payroll processing;
- insurance and risk management;
- short-term investments, banking, and cash management;
- trust and other gift administration;
- coordination of corporate-wide programs including the credit card, foreign travel, and vehicle rental programs;
- non-profit state and federal compliance reporting;
- tax research, contract review, and third-party legal services coordination;
- unclaimed property management; and
- records retention.

Financial Services also provides many of these services through consultation to Northwestern Publishing House (NPH) and WELS’ four ministerial education schools. Outside of Financial Services, the CFO also oversees the

Human Resources and Facility Services departments. The CFO is the WELS treasurer and an advisor to the Synodical Council as well as an advisor to the Board for Ministerial Education, the Accounting Oversight Committee, and the Compensation Review Committee of the Synodical Council. In addition, the CFO serves as an *ex-officio* member of the board of directors of NPH, CEF, WELS Foundation, WIF, WELS Historical Institute, WELS Retirement Program Commission, and WELS VEBA Commission.

Our current situation

Financial Services is blessed with a dedicated, talented staff with complementary education, training, and work experiences. The following is a summary of significant events or projects the Financial Services team worked on in the past year:

- Completed all audits within four months of fiscal year end (consistent with historical precedent), with all entities receiving an unmodified opinion (the best possible) on the financial statements.
- Implemented a new accounting standard issued by the Financial Accounting Standards Board related to leases during fiscal year 2023, which did not have a material impact on the consolidated financial statements of WELS.
- Implemented a new accounting standard issued by the Financial Accounting Standards Board related to the measurement of credit losses during fiscal year 2024. While this new standard generally did not have a material impact on the ministerial education schools' or support service subsidiaries' financials, it did significantly impact the process for estimating credit losses associated with the loan portfolio of CEF. We worked with the third-party accounting firm Forvis to help develop a new model for estimating credit losses and successfully implemented the new methodology for CEF and WELS during fiscal year 2024.
- Developed a strategic plan to improve the planning and development of major capital projects for the ministerial education school through a new Synod Capital Projects Fund. This fund will be used to support the site design and planning costs for the ministerial education schools and will help support possible debt service costs if funds are borrowed for a synod capital project.
- Monitored the support forecast and ministry financial plan for fiscal year 2024.
- Developed planning assumptions, preliminary support forecast, and synod support allocations for the fiscal year 2026 and fiscal year 2027 biennium ministry financial plan.

A look ahead

In addition to maintaining daily operations, Financial Services will continue to identify, investigate, and implement strategies that improve efficiency and effectiveness, reduce costs, and/or strengthen internal controls within the department and across WELS. Our upcoming plans include:

- Analyzing improvements to the synod's process of developing the ministry financial plan as well as the handling of plan modifications and capital project requests.
- Continuing to research and ultimately implement a new banking platform to better support the cash needs of the 12 districts while ensuring compliance with key legal, tax, accounting, and governance requirements.
- Continuing to monitor new accounting standards issued by the Financial Accounting Standards Board and assess any implications on WELS, its ministerial education schools, and its support service subsidiaries.
- Assisting in assessing the strategy for either renewing audit services with Baker Tilly or transitioning to a new accounting firm as the latest agreement for audit services with Baker Tilly is expiring following the fiscal year 2024 audits.
- Beginning to assess the need for a request for proposal for the synod's online payroll services and human resources software solution. The synod converted to Paycom in 2022, signing a three-year agreement.
- Continuing to research the synod's current merchant service processing solutions to help determine the most efficient and effective solution going forward.
- Researching possible alternatives to the current general ledger system that could improve efficiency and effectiveness across all entities.
- Cross-training employees to ensure service continuity during vacations, vacancies, and extended absences.

The Financial Services team is honored to serve and is prepared to use the available resources and its God-given skills and abilities to support the ministries of WELS.

Mr. Kyle Egan, reporter

Human Resources

Our calling

The synod's Human Resources department oversees the personnel functions for synod personnel, including development, communication, and implementation of personnel policies; recruitment; compensation; benefits; performance management; and managing employee relations. Human Resources provides guidance to supervisors on matters such as federal and state legal requirements to ensure compliance with labor laws.

Human Resources (HR) also serves as a resource to WELS congregations and to affiliated groups and entities on the matters mentioned above as well as for risk management and federal and state legal requirements related to personnel matters. Further, in addition to legally mandated reporting to authorities, any charge, report, or allegation of sexual misconduct or physical abuse that has been made of an incident involving pastors, teachers, vicars, full- or part-time employees, and volunteers in any capacity must be reported to the synod president, director of Lutheran Schools, or director of Human Resources.

Our current situation

Current WELS Human Resources staff consists of two full-time employees—the Human Resources director and a Human Resources generalist. Beyond day-to-day human resource management activities, a few key initiatives include:

- Staffed the following key lay worker positions over the last year: database specialist, Ministry of Christian Giving; administrative assistant, World Missions; research and development administrator, WELS Foundation; operations manager, Congregational Services; administrative assistant, Congregational Services; facilities coordinator, Facility Services; payroll and accounting specialist, Financial Services; and web services specialist, Technology.
- Called worker compensation: Education and training of congregational leadership in application of WELS Called Worker Compensation Guidelines and use of electronic Called Worker Compensation Calculator continues. Popularity and use of the Called Worker Compensation Calculator is evident through a majority of positive feedback provided. Adjustments and improvements continue to be made to the Called Worker Compensation Calculator, including through feedback received from congregation leadership.
- Reviewing background checks for all volunteers/chaperones for the 2024 WELS International Youth Rally scheduled to take place in June in Fort Collins, Colo.
- Collaborating with congregations and WELS district presidents on risk and personnel matters, as well as general compensation, benefit, and policy issues.
- Synod board/committee nominee vetting: Human Resources assists in the process of filling board/committee openings for positions appointed by the Synodical Council for WELS Voluntary Employee Benefits Association, WELS Retirement Commission, WELS Foundation, WELS Investment Funds, Accounting Oversight Committee, and WELS Church Extension Fund. This assistance takes place mainly through vetting of nominees to establish willingness to serve, procuring resume and/or bio forms, and creating a central database to maintain all nominee data and vacancy records.
- Affordable Care Act reporting and compliance: Per Affordable Care Act (ACA) compliance requirements, large employers must file annual reports and monitor measurement periods to comply with the ACA's employer mandate. Human Resources oversees this annual reporting process for the WELS Center for Mission and Ministry and WELS' four ministerial education schools.
- Vendor review process completed with new vendor Paycom selected to replace ADP for Payroll & HR Services. Timekeeping conversion completed February 2022; first payroll processing took place March 2022.
- Religious Worker Visas (R1): HR facilitates the process of securing Religious Worker Visas to assist WELS calling bodies with placement of Martin Luther College and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary international student graduates in teaching or pastoral positions within the United States.

A look ahead

The key area of focus for the HR team going forward will be to evaluate current operations and to identify where

efficiencies could be implemented while maintaining effectiveness. Over the next biennium HR will, with God's guidance and blessings:

- Update and maintain **welsrc.net/human-resources** and **cloud.wels.net/hr** to ensure information and details provided assist members from both an information as well as practical aspect.
- Improve utilization of the new Paycom HR software modules and support for the WELS Center for Mission and Ministry and the ministerial education schools.
- Work with the Synodical Council's designated committee(s) in reviewing and evaluating the policies and procedures of Human Resources and the compensation programs at our synod-operated organizations.
- Work with areas of ministry and synodical schools in coordinating timely information and support for our workers.
- Facilitate learning and development programs for the management and staff of the synod entities.
- Provide continued training with synod leaders to continue to reinforce and develop the supervisory skills required.
- Continue providing support to WELS organizations in areas related to our synod human resources.

For synodical salary ranges, WELS compensation guidelines, and other called worker compensation information, see pp. 66-68.

Questions can be directed to hro@wels.net or by calling 414-256-3268.

Mr. Dennis Maurer, reporter

Facility Services

Our calling

Facility Services provides support services to the ministries conducted at or through the synod corporate headquarters known as the WELS Center for Mission and Ministry. This objective is accomplished by providing a God-pleasing physical workspace conducive to mission and ministry operations and by creating a welcoming environment to passersby, visitors, guests, and employees.

Our current situation

The Center for Mission and Ministry is located in Waukesha, Wis., along I-94 on Stone Ridge Drive and has approximately 49,000 square feet of space on three floors. WELS and all areas of ministry operate out of the Center for Mission and Ministry, along with WELS support service subsidiaries and its affiliate, including WELS Church Extension Fund, WELS Foundation, WELS Investment Funds, Northwestern Publishing House, and WELS Benefit Plans. In addition, the Center for Mission and Ministry includes the WELS Visitors Center, a chapel, and archival space designed to preserve and organize historical WELS documents, books, and artifacts. Many of the routine services, such as cleaning, landscaping, snow removal, window washing, and HVAC controls and maintenance have been outsourced. WELS hired Tim Luetzow as a part-time facility coordinator in June 2023 focused on overseeing the management and maintenance of the building, serving as the main contact for facility issues.

The Synodical Council created the WELS Building Fund to ensure that an adequate funding source exists for maintenance and improvement of the Center for Mission and Ministry. The policy directs a portion of rents paid by WELS subsidiaries and its affiliate (WELS Church Extension Fund, WELS Foundation, WELS Investment Funds, Northwestern Publishing House, WELS Benefit Plans) to the Building Fund. As of Dec. 31, 2023, the balance of the WELS Building Fund was approximately \$290,000.

Two significant projects were completed within the last year to continue to maintain and improve the property. The first project completed was a full sealcoating and line repainting of the parking lot. The plan to manage and maintain the parking lot will be to sealcoat as needed until it becomes necessary to do a complete resurfacing. The second project was a much-needed removal and replacement of the pavers at the front entrance and rear patio.

A look ahead

Overall, the Center for Mission and Ministry building, grounds, and fixed equipment are in good to excellent condition. The HVAC system is beginning to show its age and may need to have the thermostat temperature controller components replaced in the near future. The rooftop units are original to the building and, even though they have been meticulously maintained, are reaching their service life expectancy of 25 to 30 years. Many of the facility charges have become somewhat predictable but can be significantly impacted by factors outside of management's control (such as weather, inflation, the employment market, energy costs, and the property insurance market). The most immediate project is some office renovations including the build-out of several new offices within the Center for Mission and Ministry given expanding ministry initiatives. This office build-out is being contracted and managed in house at a significant cost savings.

Mr. Kyle Egan, reporter

Financial results and ministry financial plan

Overview

The Lord has and we pray will continue to bless WELS with gifts from congregations, members, and others. These gifts are used to reach the lost at home and abroad, train and nurture called workers, and provide services that facilitate and support ministry excellence in congregations and their schools and administration.

WELS manages and reports the financial position of the synod based on a fiscal year (FY) that runs from July 1 to June 30. WELS areas of ministry, ministerial education schools, and support service subsidiaries are fully incorporated into the ministry financial plan (budget) to ensure all sources and uses of funds entrusted to WELS are reported and considered by the synod in convention.

Synod operating support is the amount of unrestricted support allocated for total ministry plan expenses for WELS areas of ministry (excluding the ministerial education schools and support service subsidiaries) covered by unrestricted support sources with approximately 70 percent annually coming from Congregation Mission Offerings (CMO) and approximately 30 percent annually coming from other unrestricted support consisting primarily of gifts, grants, bequests, and investment income. The Financial Stabilization Fund (FSF) was created to manage all unrestricted support (other than CMO) to ensure that ministry plans did not need to be adjusted in the middle of a year if these difficult-to-predict unrestricted funding sources turned out to be less than planned. The synod does not hold onto funds within the Financial Stabilization Fund for long-term spending purposes. Rather, funds are used on a continual basis to support the overall operating expenses of the synod. Separately, gifts provided by donors to WELS for a specific ministry are maintained within WELS special funds for general use by that area of ministry. Planning for and use of these gifts is initiated by areas of ministry with guidance from Financial Services and approval from the Synodical Council.

Fiscal Year 2022–23 (FY23)

WELS

WELS is financially strong. WELS areas of ministry (excluding the ministerial education schools and support service subsidiaries) received total unrestricted support in FY23 of \$51.9 million consisting of CMO of \$23.4 million, unrestricted special fund support of \$19.0 million, and other general unrestricted support of \$9.5 million. Synod operating and special fund expenses totaled \$47.8 million, leading to an overall increase in reserves without donor restrictions of \$4.1 million (an increase in unrestricted special fund reserves of \$2.1 million and an increase in the Financial Stabilization Fund balance of \$2.0 million).

- **Congregation Mission Offerings**—Reported CMO for FY23 was \$23.4 million, an increase of \$300,000 (or 1.3 percent) over the prior year and \$1.7 million (or 7.9 percent) better than the original plan. The Lord continues to bless WELS through consistent offerings from its congregations, which helps with the overall process of developing the ministry financial plan.
- **Unrestricted special fund support**—Unrestricted special fund support for FY23 was \$19.0 million, an increase of \$2.0 million (or 11.8 percent) over the prior year and \$4.3 million (or 29.2 percent) better than the original plan, driven by increased satisfactions of restrictions due to increased gifts and bequests in all areas of ministry.
- **Other unrestricted support**—Other unrestricted support consisting primarily of unrestricted gifts, grants, bequests, and investment income for FY23 was \$9.5 million, a decrease of \$710,000 (or 6.9 percent) from the prior year and \$2.3 million (or 32.1 percent) better than the original plan. The reduction from the prior year was primarily driven by the full forgiveness of WELS' Paycheck Protection Program loan plus accrued interest totaling \$2.7 million in FY22 that did not repeat in FY23, partially offset by higher investment income, bequests, and grants. The improvement over the original plan was primarily driven by higher gifts, grants and bequests, and investment income.

• **Synod operating and special fund expenses**—Synod operating and special fund expenses for FY23 were \$47.8 million, an increase in expenses of \$3.5 million (or 7.9 percent) over the prior year and in line with the original plan. The increase in expenses over the prior year was driven by increased costs within World Missions due to the timing of expenses associated with the completion of the theological training center in Vietnam, aid for relief in Ukraine, and costs associated with moving and travel.

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary is financially strong. Reserves without donor restrictions in FY23 increased \$1.7 million to \$11.4 million. Total support without donor restrictions of \$8.1 million was \$2.3 million (or 40.3 percent) higher than the prior year driven by significantly improved investment returns. Total expenses without donor restrictions of \$6.4 million were \$920,000 (or 12.6 percent) lower than the prior year driven by lower facility costs and lower vicar-related costs due to a smaller vicar class as compared to the prior year.

Martin Luther College

Martin Luther College is financially stable. Reserves without donor restrictions in FY23 decreased \$122,000 to \$16.5 million. Total support without donor restrictions of \$23.9 million was \$6.0 million (or 20.1 percent) lower than the prior year driven by lower satisfactions of restrictions due to the completion of the Betty Kohn Fieldhouse in FY22, lower grant income, and reduced student tuition income from lower on-campus enrollment. Total expenses without donor restrictions of \$24.0 million were \$4.7 million (or 16.5 percent) lower than the prior year driven by lower costs incurred in FY23 as compared to FY22 from the completion of the Betty Kohn Fieldhouse.

Luther Preparatory School

Luther Preparatory School is financially stable. Reserves without donor restrictions in FY23 increased \$179,000 to \$4.9 million. Total support without donor restrictions of \$9.2 million was consistent with the prior year. Total expenses without donor restrictions of \$9.0 million were \$333,000 (or 3.8 percent) higher than the prior year driven by higher wages and benefit costs.

Michigan Lutheran Seminary

Michigan Lutheran Seminary is financially stable. Reserves without donor restrictions in FY23 increased \$87,000 to \$1.3 million. Total support without donor restrictions of \$4.6 million was \$441,000 (or 10.5 percent) higher than the prior year driven by increased gifts and grants, higher student tuition income, and higher levels of satisfaction of reserves. Total expenses without donor restrictions of \$4.5 million were \$554,000 (or 13.8 percent) higher than the prior year driven by higher wages and benefit costs and costs associated with the one-time expenses for new gym bleachers, technology upgrades, and equipment for the dining hall.

WELS Church Extension Fund

WELS Church Extension Fund is financially strong. Reserves without donor restrictions in FY23 increased \$6.1 million to \$91.2 million. Total support without donor restrictions of \$11.2 million was \$971,000 (or 9.5 percent) better than the prior year driven by higher investment income and the receipt of several large bequests. Total expenses without donor restrictions of \$5.1 million were \$1.3 million (or 20.1 percent) lower than the prior year due to lower overall grant expenses, partially offset by favorable provision for loan loss adjustments.

WELS Foundation

WELS Foundation is financially strong. Reserves without donor restrictions in FY23 decreased \$4.7 million to \$12.6 million. Total support without donor restrictions of \$7.2 million was \$2.6 million (or 26.1 percent) lower than the prior year driven by a lower level of gifts received. Total expenses without donor restrictions of \$11.9 million were \$5.0 million (or 73.1 percent) higher than the prior year driven by increased distributions to ministry.

WELS Investment Funds

WELS Investment Funds continues to be financially blessed, despite recent market volatility in both the equity and fixed income markets. WELS Investment Funds does not have reserves because it invests and administers funds for others. Assets under management in FY23 increased by \$24.7 million (or 9.2 percent) to \$294.5 million driven by realized and unrealized market gains.

Northwestern Publishing House

Northwestern Publishing House is financially stable. Reserves without donor restrictions in FY23 increased \$1.5 million to \$13.8 million. Total revenue without donor restrictions of \$6.5 million was \$2.1 million (or 24.6 percent)

lower than the prior year due to a lower level of sales from the new hymnal suite of products during the second full year following its launch. Total expenses without donor restrictions of \$5.0 million were \$1.1 million (or 17.3 percent) lower than the prior year due to lower product costs related to the lower sales and efficient product development.

Fiscal Year 2023–24 (FY24)

WELS

Support and expense projections point to continued financial strength for WELS in FY24.

- **Congregation Mission Offerings**—Through December 2023 (six months), CMO was \$12.6 million, flat to the prior year. CMO is projected to be \$23.3 million in FY24, relatively consistent with planned levels.
- **Unrestricted special fund support**—Through December 2023 (six months), unrestricted special fund support was \$9.5 million and is trending better than the planned pace for the fiscal year.
- **Other unrestricted support**—Through December 2023 (six months), other unrestricted support was \$6.3 million and is trending better than the planned pace for the fiscal year. This is being driven by increased levels of gifts and bequests and higher-than-planned investment income.
- **Synod operating and special fund expenses**—Through December 2023 (six months), total synod operating and special fund expenses were \$24.5 million and are trending slightly below the planned pace for the fiscal year.

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary remains financially strong. Through December 2023 (six months), reserves without donor restrictions increased \$1.3 million on support of \$4.8 million and expenses of \$3.5 million. Support without donor restrictions has been trending higher than planned levels due to increased grants, bequests, and investment income, while expenses without donor restrictions have been trending in line with planned levels.

Martin Luther College

Martin Luther College remains financially stable. Through December 2023 (six months), reserves without donor restrictions increased \$247,000 on support of \$12.1 million and expenses of \$11.8 million. Support without donor restrictions has been trending in line with planned levels, while expenses without donor restrictions have been trending lower than planned levels due to lower wage and benefit costs and cafeteria expenses.

Luther Preparatory School

Luther Preparatory School remains financially stable. Through December 2023 (six months), reserves without donor restrictions increased \$811,000 on support of \$5.3 million and expenses of \$4.5 million. Support without donor restrictions has been trending higher than planned levels due to increased gifts, student tuition income, and investment income, while expenses without donor restrictions have been trending in line with planned levels.

Michigan Lutheran Seminary

Michigan Lutheran Seminary remains financially stable. Through December 2023 (six months), reserves without donor restrictions increased \$320,000 on support of \$2.5 million and expenses of \$2.2 million. Support without donor restrictions has been trending higher than planned levels due to increased gifts and grants, while expenses without donor restrictions have been trending in line with planned levels.

WELS Church Extension Fund

WELS Church Extension Fund remains financially strong. Through December 2023 (six months), reserves without donor restrictions increased \$1.1 million on support of \$5.9 million and expenses of \$4.8 million. Support without donor restriction has been trending higher than planned levels due to higher interest income from its loan portfolio and higher investment returns, while expenses without donor restrictions have been trending higher than planned levels due to increased grant expenses for new mission loans.

WELS Foundation

WELS Foundation remains financially strong. Through December 2023 (six months), reserves without donor restrictions increased \$614,000 on support of \$4.4 million and expenses of \$3.8 million. The value of deferred giving instruments has increased \$5.7 million (or 3.3 percent) to \$181.8 million as of December 2023 due to improved investment returns and a continued increase in new deferred giving instruments.

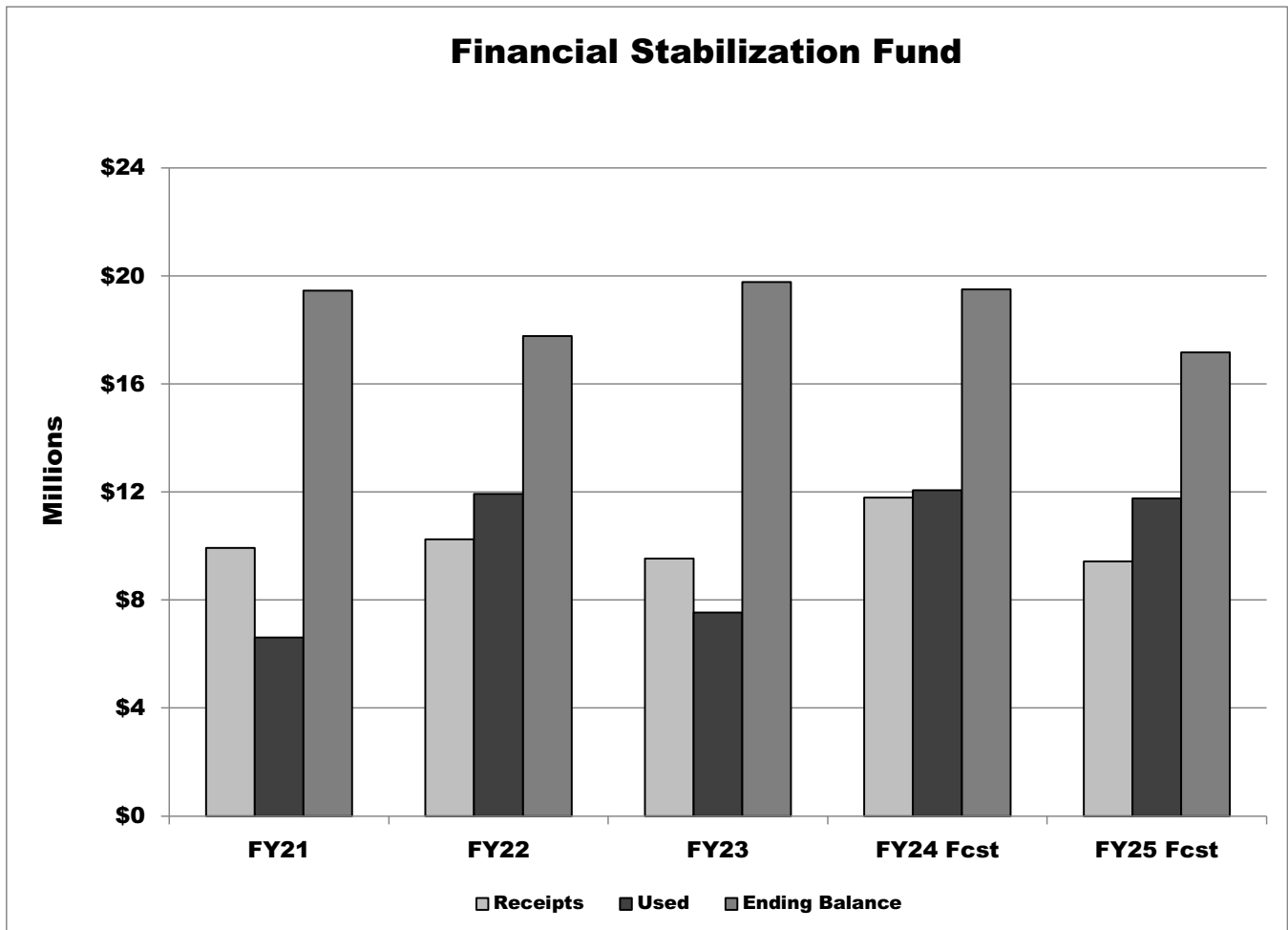
WELS Investment Funds

WELS Investment Funds continues to be financially blessed. Through December 2023 (six months), assets under management have increased \$10.0 million (or 3.4 percent) to \$304.5 million due to favorable investment returns.

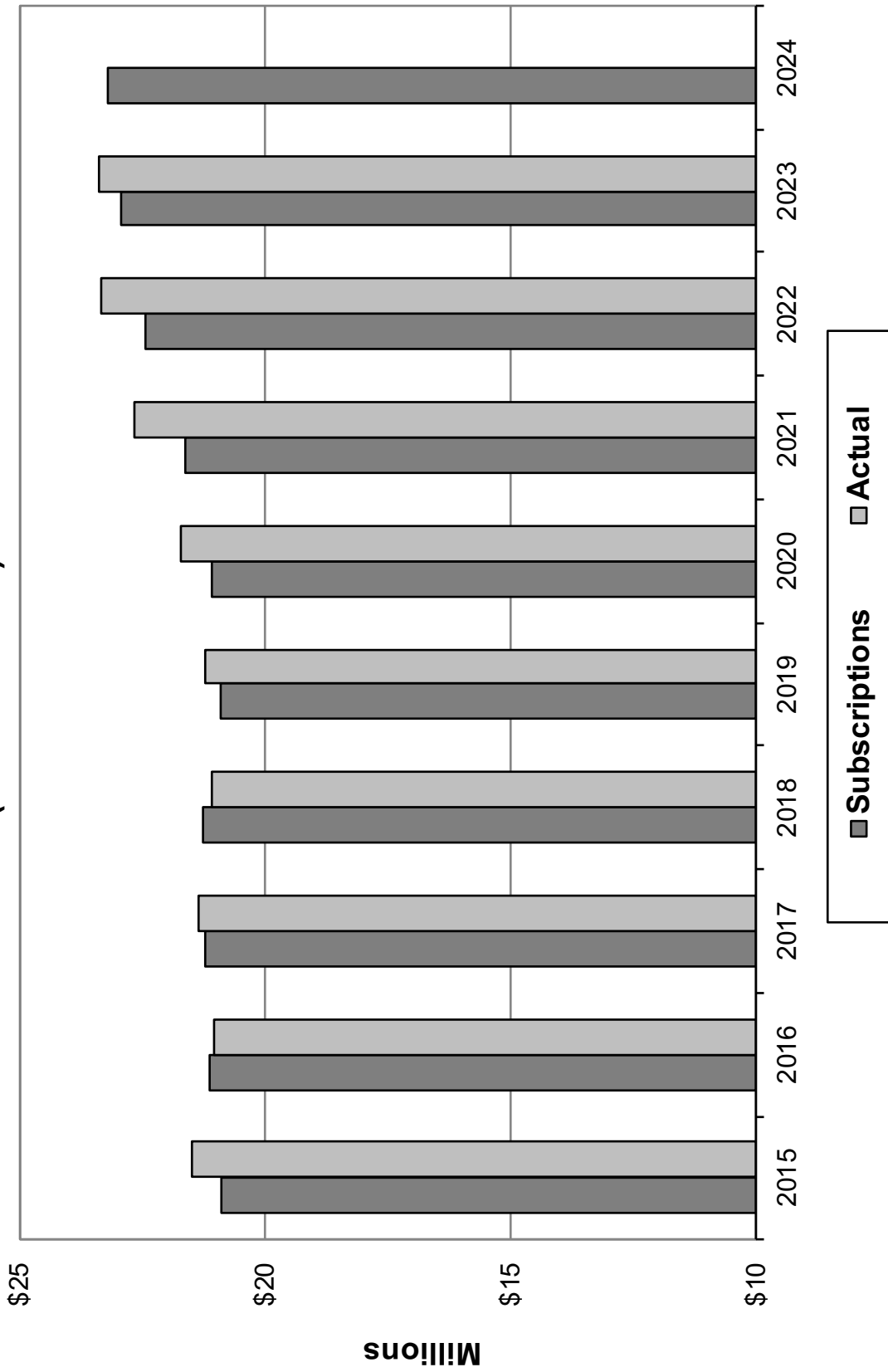
Northwestern Publishing House

Northwestern Publishing House remains financially stable. Through December 2023 (six months), reserves without donor restrictions increased \$902,000 on revenue of \$2.9 million, other income of \$450,000, and expenses of \$2.4 million. Sales and revenue are trending higher than planned levels as is other income due to higher investment income, while expenses are trending lower than planned levels due to tight cost controls.

Mr. Kyle Egan, reporter



Congregation Mission Offerings (Calendar Year)



WISCONSIN EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN SYNOD

Consolidating Statement of Financial Position
As of June 30, 2023

ASSETS

	WELS	MLC	WLS	MLS	LPS	WELS CEF	WELS Foundation	WIF	WHI	NPH	Eliminations	Consolidated
ASSETS												
Cash and cash equivalents	\$ 66,863,621	\$ 1,524,978	\$ 3,115,833	\$ 1,387,050	\$ 10,187,718	\$ 18,790,190	\$ 2,078,202	\$ -	\$ 12,555	\$ 2,386,634	\$ (3,443,328)	\$ 102,903,453
Restricted cash	1,126,710	-	-	-	-	-	517,287	-	-	-	-	1,643,997
Investments	-	15,967,194	2,771,101	317,671	-	31,172,486	176,768,713	294,461,997	-	8,595,837	(227,231,451)	302,823,548
Accounts receivable, net	1,852,465	58,726	58,763	50,297	12,690	-	6,360	-	-	543,613	(19,651)	2,563,263
Gifts and bequests receivable, net	1,273,941	63,635	338,426	15,052	235,932	813,099	-	-	-	-	-	2,740,085
Accrued interest receivable	-	-	-	-	-	512,632	-	-	-	-	-	512,632
Inventories, net	-	184,894	121,174	38,686	20,929	-	-	-	-	2,036,309	-	2,401,992
Loans to students, net	-	398,667	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	398,667
Property and real estate held for sale	-	-	-	-	-	-	1,311,491	-	-	-	-	1,311,491
Loans receivable from congregations, net	-	-	-	-	-	169,829,869	-	-	-	-	-	169,829,869
Cash surrender value of life insurance policies	-	71,030	42,719	1,610	-	-	1,062,806	-	-	-	-	1,178,165
Assets held in trust outside WELS	1,876	1,195,914	-	134,346	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1,332,136
Other assets	580,354	208,732	136,009	533	47,749	126,194	500	-	-	61,906	-	1,161,977
Interest in net assets of WELS Foundation	19,775,986	2,375,757	1,798,482	2,253,457	469,600	528,362	-	-	-	-	(27,201,644)	-
Beneficial interest in net assets of WELS Foundation	19,795,760	3,570,374	2,586,256	273,525	612,008	-	-	-	-	-	(26,837,923)	-
Property, plant, and equipment, net	4,377,923	28,747,077	4,936,768	5,177,331	8,283,696	-	-	-	-	576,559	-	52,099,354
Interest in assets of WELS Foundation	25,055,481	19,760,283	22,995,899	1,603,616	3,159,853	-	-	-	-	-	(72,575,132)	-
Due (to)/from related party	(281,580)	3,996,880	1,769,034	-	(5,038,898)	(62,915)	-	523,241	2,520	583,202	(1,491,484)	-
TOTAL ASSETS	\$ 140,422,537	\$ 78,124,141	\$ 40,670,464	\$ 11,253,174	\$ 17,991,277	\$ 221,709,917	\$ 181,745,359	\$ 294,985,238	\$ 15,075	\$ 14,784,060	\$ (358,800,613)	\$ 642,900,629

WISCONSIN EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN SYNOD

Consolidating Statement of Financial Position (continued)
As of June 30, 2023

LIABILITIES AND NET ASSETS

	WELS	MLC	WLS	MLS	LPS	WELS CEF	WELS Foundation	WIF	WHI	NPH	Eliminations	Consolidated
LIABILITIES												
Accounts payable	\$ 1,567,630	\$ 603,700	\$ 97,506	\$ 75,246	\$ 279,160	\$ -	\$ 51,014	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 158,453	\$ -	\$ 2,832,709
Accrued expenses and other liabilities	3,469,908	350,298	81,964	49,572	274,352	4,276,664	-	325,076	-	189,346	(352,881)	8,664,299
Deferred revenue	80,528	453,782	264,335	20,272	98,175	-	-	-	-	621,421	-	1,538,513
Retiree health benefits payable	670,223	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	670,223
Certificates payable	-	-	-	-	-	93,585,569	-	-	-	-	(14,563,652)	79,021,917
Deposits held in custody	1,116,090	421,731	14,647	2,633	22,729	-	-	-	-	-	-	1,577,830
Liabilities to other beneficiaries	-	1,421,450	-	-	-	-	19,093,988	-	-	-	-	20,515,438
Liabilities to outside agencies and organizations	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	78,888,086	78,888,086
Gift annuities payable, at fair value	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Trusts payable	-	-	-	-	-	-	9,121,989	-	-	-	-	9,121,989
U.S. government grants refundable	-	246,775	-	-	-	-	13,161,322	-	-	-	-	13,161,322
Due to WELS and Schools	-	-	-	-	-	-	72,598,303	-	-	-	(72,598,303)	246,775
Due to/(from) related party	523,241	-	-	35,107	-	-	-	-	-	-	(1,474,133)	-
Total Liabilities	7,427,620	3,497,736	458,452	182,830	674,416	98,778,018	114,026,616	325,076	-	969,220	(10,100,883)	216,239,101
NET ASSETS												
Without donor restrictions	58,725,995	16,544,690	11,352,735	1,288,660	4,861,920	91,231,063	12,647,351	294,660,162	15,075	13,748,298	(250,605,743)	254,480,206
With donor restrictions	74,268,922	58,081,715	28,859,277	9,771,684	12,454,941	31,700,836	55,071,392	-	-	66,542	(98,093,987)	172,181,322
Total Net Assets	132,994,917	74,626,405	40,212,012	11,070,344	17,316,861	122,931,899	67,718,743	294,660,162	15,075	13,814,840	(348,699,730)	426,661,528
TOTAL LIABILITIES AND NET ASSETS	\$ 140,422,537	\$ 78,124,141	\$ 40,670,464	\$ 11,253,174	\$ 17,991,277	\$ 221,709,917	\$ 181,745,359	\$ 294,985,238	\$ 15,075	\$ 14,784,060	\$ (358,800,613)	\$ 642,900,629

WISCONSIN EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN SYNOD

Consolidating Statement of Activities
As of and For the Year Ended June 30, 2023

	WELS	MLC	WLS	MLS	LPS	WELS CEF	WELS Foundation	WIF	WHI	NPH	Eliminations	Consolidated
MEMBER SUPPORT, REVENUE AND RECLASSIFICATIONS												
Member Support:												
Offerings from congregations	\$ 23,395,139	\$ -	\$ 982,513	462,123	\$ -	\$ -	1,272,779	-	-	-	\$ -	\$ 23,395,139
Gifts and grants	5,153,707	1,309,394	96,283	-	436,069	52,354	1,272,779	-	1,824	-	(3,016,827)	6,653,936
Bequests	2,013,506	397,787	115,150	-	-	1,376,681	960,057	-	-	-	-	4,863,181
Total Member Support	30,562,352	1,707,181	1,097,663	462,123	436,069	1,429,035	2,232,836	-	1,824	-	(3,016,827)	34,912,256
Revenues:												
Tuition and student fees, net	-	11,703,474	347,226	1,754,979	4,486,613	-	-	-	-	-	-	18,292,292
Activity fees and retail sales	2,326,309	1,080,685	96,283	161,864	158,105	-	-	20,397,148	6,805	5,714,682	(20,973,553)	8,868,328
Investment returns, net	2,672,049	861,317	1,206,452	20,367	195,000	8,596,497	1,025,221	30,414,301	4	534,269	(30,143,813)	15,381,664
Net gain (loss) on sale of property and real estate held for sale	-	-	-	-	-	-	(2,085)	-	-	-	-	(2,085)
Change in value of trust agreements	994,333	124,084	74,029	(3,040)	87,052	-	673,820	-	23	12,757	(10,277)	(1,332)
Other	1,998,725	4,150,690	2,201,095	1,341,175	2,826,855	-	-	-	70,128	-	(12,588,668)	1,793,529
Transfer from other funds	7,991,416	17,921,096	3,925,085	3,262,890	7,753,625	8,596,497	1,696,956	50,811,449	76,960	6,261,708	(63,865,286)	44,432,396
Total Revenues	13,476,971	4,235,517	3,024,280	929,402	1,004,836	1,200,431	3,316,747	-	14,767	223,424	(4,632,580)	22,793,795
Net assets released from restrictions	13,476,971	4,235,517	3,024,280	929,402	1,004,836	1,200,431	3,316,747	-	14,767	223,424	(4,632,580)	22,793,795
Total Reclassifications	13,476,971	4,235,517	3,024,280	929,402	1,004,836	1,200,431	3,316,747	-	14,767	223,424	(4,632,580)	22,793,795
Total Member Support, Revenues and Reclassifications	52,030,739	23,863,794	8,047,028	4,654,415	9,194,530	11,225,963	7,246,539	50,811,449	93,551	6,485,132	(71,514,693)	102,138,447
EXPENSES												
Program Services:												
Ministerial education	9,858,097	20,178,778	5,343,079	3,726,710	7,804,395	-	-	-	-	-	(11,731,683)	35,179,376
World missions	13,272,802	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	(239,167)	13,033,635
Home missions	10,297,491	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	(461,402)	9,836,089
Congregational and district ministry	8,380,716	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	(246,372)	8,134,344
Northwestern Publishing House	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3,869,110	(61,238)	3,807,872
Total Program Services	41,809,106	20,178,778	5,343,079	3,726,710	7,804,395	-	-	-	-	3,869,110	(12,739,862)	69,991,316
Support Services:												
Ministry support subsidiaries	-	-	-	-	-	4,662,467	6,017,909	-	87,680	-	(2,442,462)	8,325,594
General and administrative	4,006,742	3,140,026	735,532	808,817	1,065,234	409,321	379,161	467,825	3,340	1,139,811	(400,685)	11,755,124
Mission advancement	2,117,763	667,513	312,929	32,062	146,194	-	-	-	-	-	86,018	3,364,479
Transfer to other funds	-	-	-	-	-	-	5,545,281	25,559,694	299	-	(31,105,474)	-
Total Support Services	6,124,505	3,807,539	1,048,461	840,879	1,211,428	5,071,788	11,942,351	26,027,719	91,319	1,139,811	(33,860,603)	23,445,197
Total Expenses	47,933,611	23,986,317	6,391,540	4,567,589	9,015,823	5,071,788	11,942,351	26,027,719	91,319	5,008,921	(46,600,465)	93,436,513
CHANGE IN NET ASSETS												
NET ASSETS - Beginning of Year	4,097,128	(122,523)	1,655,488	86,826	178,707	6,154,175	(4,695,812)	24,783,730	2,232	1,476,211	(24,914,228)	8,701,934
NET ASSETS - End of Year	54,628,867	16,544,690	9,697,247	1,211,834	4,683,213	85,076,888	17,343,163	269,876,432	12,843	12,272,087	(225,691,515)	245,778,272
NET ASSETS - END OF YEAR	\$ 58,725,995	\$ 16,544,690	\$ 11,952,735	\$ 1,298,660	\$ 4,881,920	\$ 91,231,063	\$ 12,647,351	\$ 294,660,162	\$ 15,075	\$ 13,748,298	\$ (250,605,743)	\$ 254,480,206

WISCONSIN EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN SYNOD

Consolidating Statement of Activities (continued)
As of and For the Year Ended June 30, 2023

	WITH DONOR RESTRICTIONS											Eliminations	Consolidated		
	WELS	MLC	WLS	MLS	LPS	WELS CEF	WELS Foundation	WIF	WHI	NPH					
MEMBER SUPPORT, REVENUE AND RECLASSIFICATIONS															
Member Support:															
Gifts and grants	\$ 8,173,612	\$ 3,040,798	\$ 3,891,102	\$ 326,950	\$ 796,686	\$ -	\$ 1,574,610	\$ -	\$ 3,320	\$ 210,750	\$ -	\$ -	\$ (114,747)	\$ 17,903,081	
Bequests	2,800,073	113,217	980,638	50	-	-	346,742	-	-	-	-	-	(1,177)	4,239,543	
Total Member Support	10,973,685	3,154,015	4,871,740	327,000	796,686	-	1,921,352	-	3,320	210,750	-	-	(115,924)	22,142,624	
Revenues:															
Investment returns, net	2,764,900	2,308,548	1,461,732	178,263	281,764	3,438,562	8,063,045	-	-	-	-	-	-	18,476,814	
Net gain (loss) on sale of property and real estate held for sale	-	-	-	-	-	-	67,299	-	-	-	-	-	-	67,299	
Change in value of trust agreements	5,141,060	849,789	571,543	204,663	133,689	60,447	(1,652,298)	-	-	-	-	-	(6,907,938)	(1,599,045)	
Contributed nonfinancial assets	-	1,059,792	166,293	95,720	623,936	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	(1,945,741)	-	
Other	54,968	-	1,298	-	21,824	-	21,369	-	-	-	-	-	(96)	99,363	
Total Revenues	7,960,928	4,218,129	2,200,866	478,646	1,041,213	3,495,009	6,499,415	-	-	-	-	-	(8,853,775)	17,044,431	
Reclassifications:															
Net assets released from restrictions	(13,476,971)	(4,235,517)	(3,024,280)	(929,402)	(1,004,836)	(1,200,431)	(3,316,747)	-	(14,767)	(223,424)	-	-	4,632,580	(22,793,795)	
Total Reclassifications	(13,476,971)	(4,235,517)	(3,024,280)	(929,402)	(1,004,836)	(1,200,431)	(3,316,747)	-	(14,767)	(223,424)	-	-	4,632,580	(22,793,795)	
CHANGE IN NET ASSETS	5,457,642	3,136,627	4,048,326	(123,756)	833,063	2,298,578	5,104,020	-	(11,447)	(12,674)	-	-	(4,337,119)	16,393,280	
NET ASSETS - Beginning of Year	68,811,280	54,945,088	24,810,951	9,895,440	11,621,878	29,402,258	49,967,372	-	11,447	79,216	-	-	(93,756,868)	155,788,062	
NET ASSETS - END OF YEAR	\$ 74,268,922	\$ 58,081,715	\$ 28,859,277	\$ 9,771,684	\$ 12,454,941	\$ 31,700,836	\$ 55,071,392	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 66,542	\$ -	\$ -	\$ (98,093,987)	\$ 172,181,322	

WELS compensation guidelines

1.22% matrix adjustment factor
(multiply established cash housing allowances by 1.0122 for new FY)

WELS COMPENSATION GUIDELINES Salary matrix 2024-25

Range Spread	12,546	13,330	15,683	16,467	17,251	18,035	18,819	19,603	20,388	21,172
Service Incr.	418	444	523	549	575	601	627	653	680	706
Ranges	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J
<i>Experience</i>										
0	25,092	26,660	31,365	32,933	34,502	36,070	37,638	39,206	40,775	42,343
1	25,510	27,104	31,888	33,482	35,077	36,671	38,265	39,859	41,455	43,049
2	25,928	27,549	32,411	34,031	35,652	37,272	38,893	40,513	42,134	43,754
3	26,347	27,993	32,933	34,580	36,227	37,874	39,520	41,166	42,814	44,460
4	26,765	28,437	33,456	35,129	36,802	38,475	40,147	41,820	43,493	45,166
5	27,183	28,882	33,979	35,677	37,377	39,076	40,775	42,473	44,173	45,872
6	27,601	29,326	34,502	36,226	37,952	39,677	41,402	43,127	44,853	46,577
7	28,019	29,770	35,024	36,775	38,527	40,278	42,029	43,780	45,532	47,283
8	28,438	30,215	35,547	37,324	39,102	40,879	42,656	44,433	46,212	47,989
9	28,856	30,659	36,070	37,873	39,677	41,481	43,284	45,087	46,891	48,694
10	29,274	31,103	36,593	38,422	40,252	42,082	43,911	45,740	47,571	49,400
11	29,692	31,548	37,115	38,971	40,827	42,683	44,538	46,394	48,250	50,106
12	30,110	31,992	37,638	39,520	41,402	43,284	45,166	47,047	48,930	50,812
13	30,529	32,436	38,161	40,068	41,977	43,885	45,793	47,701	49,610	51,517
14	30,947	32,881	38,684	40,617	42,552	44,486	46,420	48,354	50,289	52,223
15	31,365	33,325	39,206	41,166	43,128	45,088	47,048	49,008	50,969	52,929
16	31,783	33,769	39,729	41,715	43,703	45,689	47,675	49,661	51,648	53,634
17	32,201	34,214	40,252	42,264	44,278	46,290	48,302	50,314	52,328	54,340
18	32,620	34,658	40,775	42,813	44,853	46,891	48,929	50,968	53,008	55,046
19	33,038	35,102	41,297	43,362	45,428	47,492	49,557	51,621	53,687	55,752
20	33,456	35,547	41,820	43,911	46,003	48,093	50,184	52,275	54,367	56,457
21	33,874	35,991	42,343	44,460	46,578	48,694	50,811	52,928	55,046	57,163
22	34,292	36,435	42,866	45,008	47,153	49,296	51,439	53,582	55,726	57,869
23	34,711	36,880	43,388	45,557	47,728	49,897	52,066	54,235	56,405	58,574
24	35,129	37,324	43,911	46,106	48,303	50,498	52,693	54,888	57,085	59,280
25	35,547	37,768	44,434	46,655	48,878	51,099	53,321	55,542	57,765	59,986
26	35,965	38,213	44,957	47,204	49,453	51,700	53,948	56,195	58,444	60,692
27	36,383	38,657	45,479	47,753	50,028	52,301	54,575	56,849	59,124	61,397
28	36,802	39,101	46,002	48,302	50,603	52,903	55,202	57,502	59,803	62,103
29	37,220	39,546	46,525	48,851	51,178	53,504	55,830	58,156	60,483	62,809
30	37,638	39,990	47,048	49,399	51,753	54,105	56,457	58,809	61,163	63,515
31	38,056	40,434	47,570	49,948	52,328	54,706	57,084	59,462	61,842	64,220
32	38,474	40,879	48,093	50,497	52,903	55,307	57,712	60,116	62,522	64,926

See pp. 67 and 68 for current synodical salary range assignments and above base compensation for called workers.

Synodical salary range assignments

Salary matrix is available on p. 66.

Early childhood ministry teacher (no degree)	A
Early childhood ministry teacher (associate's degree)	B
Early childhood ministry teacher (bachelor's degree)	C - F
Teacher (BS or BA base)	C - F
Secondary teacher	D - G
Early childhood ministry director	D - G
Prep professor	D - G
Staff minister	D - G
Principal	E - H
Christian giving counselor	E - H
Prep vice president	E - H
Prep dean	E - H
College professor	E - H
Pastor	E - H
Home missionary	E - H
World missionary	E - H
CMM associate administrator	E - H
CMM associate director	E - H
CMM national coordinator	E - H
Mission counselor	E - H
CMM administrator	F - I
CMM director	F - I
Prep president	F - I
College vice president	F - I
College dean	F - I
Seminary professor	F - I
Seminary vice president	F - I
College president	G - I
Seminary president	G - I
Synod president	J

Note: A periodic review (minimally once per year) should be undertaken to evaluate an individual's compensation level. Changing call responsibilities and educational levels may lead to a salary adjustment.

NOTES:

1. The online Called Worker Compensation Calculator at cwcompcalc.wels.net helps a calling body consider the impact of additional responsibilities and education in determining where in the suggested salary range the worker ought to be placed.
2. There is a 50 percent spread between 0-30 years of experience.
3. Columns C-J increase in 5 percent increments over column C. (For example, Rate Range E is 10 percent greater than Rate Range C, Rate Range F is 15 percent greater, etc.)
4. Each called worker's actual salary is determined by finding the applicable experience row and determining the appropriate rate range. (For example, a teacher with 10 years' experience should receive a salary between \$36,593 and \$42,082. Salaries greater than \$36,593 would recognize additional education credentials and responsibility levels.)
5. The entire salary matrix will be reviewed annually and adjusted as needed to reflect changes occurring in the economy.
6. The basis for the housing equity allowance is the entry level base salary (matrix column "C," 0 years of service).
7. The cost of living adjustment (COLA) is applied to the worker's salary.

Above base compensation components for called workers

1. Cost of living adjustment using Council for Community and Economic Research (C2ER) or similar COLA index. Should simply be \$0 if resulting COLA is negative.
2. Cash housing allowance if not provided housing (using HUD Fair Market Rental Values established upon hire date + adjusted annually based on the percent change recommended in upper left corner of the salary matrix. For 2024–25 this adjustment would be 1.0122 percent).
3. Social Security (SECA) allowance (7.65 percent of salary, cost of living, and housing value/cash housing/fair market rental of parsonage-teacherage).
4. Housing equity of 2 percent of entry-level base (Column C, 0 years of service) for workers in provided housing (parsonage/teacherage). Amount is \$627 for 2024–25.
5. VEBA health insurance or similar.
6. WELS Retirement Program.
7. Reimbursement for business-related expenses such as travel and conferences.

Note: A web-based Called Worker Compensation Calculator can be found at cwcompcalc.wels.net.

Additional called worker compensation resources including the salary matrices are available at welsrc.net/human-resources or on the Human Resources page under “compensation” on WELS Cloud at cloud.wels.net.

Missions

Board for Home Missions

Our calling

This phrase from the hymn *God's Word Is Our Great Heritage* (*Christian Worship* 640) sums our calling up clearly: "... to spread its light from age to age shall be our chief endeavor." Our "chief endeavor" is to "go and make disciples . . . to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:19,20). If it wasn't, the Lord would have called us all to heaven already. But he hasn't, because we have work to do. Jesus has called us to join him on his mission to spread the light of God's Word to a sin-darkened world. By God's grace we see the light of the cross and empty tomb. We want others to see that light and experience life in that light.

The role of WELS Home Missions is to plant churches and assist mission-minded congregations in the United States, Canada, and English-speaking West Indies so that we can spread the light of God's Word to more people. Currently, Home Missions supports 157 congregations with financial subsidy or district mission board/mission counselor assistance, with 32 of those being cross-cultural mission congregations. Home Missions also provides more than 45 campus ministries with financial support while assisting hundreds of other congregations that serve college students around the United States and Canada.

WELS has 14 Home Missions districts, each with its own district mission board. Each district mission board is comprised of pastors and lay volunteers who plan the work to start new missions and support existing missions in their districts. Two representatives from each district serve on the Board for Home Missions (BHM). The BHM members approve new starts and enhancement ministries and help set overall direction for WELS Home Missions. District mission boards and home missions churches are supported by three home missions counselors, a Hispanic outreach consultant, an Asian ministry coordinator, and a Campus Ministry mission counselor. Mission counselors work with district mission boards to help start new home missions and provide counseling and assistance to home mission congregations and the home missionaries who serve them.

Our current situation

100 missions in 10 years

At the 2021 synod convention, delegates enthusiastically approved a WELS Home Missions initiative to plant 100 new mission churches and enhance 75 ministries in 10 years beginning in 2023. Since then, we have seen widespread support from all areas of ministry in WELS. The 100 Missions in 10 Years initiative is truly a synodwide endeavor. WELS President Mark Schroeder and the district presidents; WELS Church Extension Fund; the Synodical Council; and the leaders in Ministerial Education, World Missions, and Congregational Services are all doing their part to support this important initiative. We thank God for our partnership in the gospel and the cooperative spirit of our leaders within all areas of ministry in WELS.

This doesn't mean there aren't challenges. We're entering mission fields filled with people who are naturally opposed to God and his Word. This has always been a challenge. It always will be. It didn't deter first-century Christians. It doesn't deter us. There are the additional challenges of money and manpower. The cost of real estate, housing, and insurance continues to increase, driving up costs, while the pastoral vacancy rate in WELS continues to rise.

We understand the concerns these challenges create. For members of the congregation that has been without a full-time pastor for a year or longer, it's hard. For the district presidents providing call lists for those congregations, it's hard. For the core group of the new mission that was approved for funding but still waits for a missionary a year later, it's hard. For the missionary going into a mission field knowing no one and meeting prospective members

who embrace lifestyles and beliefs that fly in the face of Scripture, it's hard. For the person canvassing the local neighborhood and encountering verbal defiance that would make most people blush, it's hard. None of these are hypothetical challenges. They are real. Yes, faithfully carrying out "our chief endeavor" is hard.

So what do we do? Do we cower in fear and shy away from our mission? No. We do what God's people have done for centuries as they worked to expand God's kingdom. We go back to Jesus' words that he spoke as he sent his disciples into a mission field filled with challenges that included the threat of death for proclaiming Christ: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18). We go back to the truth that Jesus sits at the Father's right hand as God "placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church" (Ephesians 1:22). Jesus is our Savior-King seated on his throne in his castle ruling all things for the benefit of his Church. We recall that he has powerfully equipped us with his Word and sacraments that make the dead alive. We rely on his assuring words, "I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20), working all things out for our good and the good of his people (Romans 8:28).

These promises don't make the challenges go away. Instead they empower us to go forward with confidence. "For the spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline" (2 Timothy 1:7). God's promises empower us to lean into the challenges we face as we "make disciples of all nations." They embolden us to make hard decisions and do the hard work. They fill us with confidence, not in ourselves and our decisions or our initiatives, but in our Savior King's Word, power, wisdom, and promises. Christ has ruled this way for generations. He will continue to do so for this generation until "the very end of the age."

We thank God we share this confidence with our brothers and sisters in Christ throughout WELS.

Special gifts and offerings

As noted above, the cost of opening new missions and providing enhancement grants to mission-minded congregations is increasing exponentially. It wasn't long ago that the average cost of planting a mission was around \$1 million. That cost is quickly approaching \$1.5 million and even higher in urban locations like Atlanta, Boston, and Houston.

We're thankful that the Lord of the Church provides for his people to do this work. We marvel at the following blessings: As of March 2024, \$7 million was given by churches, schools, individuals, estates, and groups like the Lutheran Women's Missionary Society (LWMS), women's groups, and men's groups. Additionally, more than \$2 million was given by churches that closed and sold their property. In total, \$9.2 million has been given to WELS Home Missions between September 2021 and March 2024.

As we give thanks to God for the generosity of God's people, we also know there will be an ongoing need for special gifts so that we can continue to financially support the "100 in 10" initiative.

New starts and enhancements approved in 2023

In 2023, the Board for Home Missions approved 20 new home mission starts and enhancements.

New starts were approved in Bentonville, Ark.; Boston, Mass.; Cincinnati, Ohio; Idaho Falls, Idaho; Kalispell, Mont.; Kronenwetter, Wis.; Marquette, Mich.; North Collin County, Texas; Panama City Beach, Fla.; and Buffalo, Wyo.

Enhancements were approved at Mt. Calvary, Anderson, Calif.; Christ the King, Palm Coast, Fla.; Hope, Deerfield, Wis.; Cross of Christ, Las Cruces, N.M.; Beautiful Savior, West Des Moines, Iowa; Fairview, Milwaukee, Wis.; Christ the King, Port Charlotte, Fla.; Divine Savior, Sienna, Texas; Good Shepherd, Midland, Texas (unsubsidized); and Our Redeemer, Ladysmith, Wis. (unsubsidized).

New starts and enhancements approved in 2024

The Board for Home Missions met in April 2024 and approved 12 new home mission starts and enhancements.

Five new starts were approved:

Bend, Ore.: Bend was identified in 2020 as the second-fastest growing city in the U.S. A core group of eight families has been gathering twice a month for Bible study and planning as they plant a church in an area where 62 percent of people are not involved with any religious community.

Cedar Lake, Ind.: Members from Trinity and Zion in Crete, Ill., have formed a core group to plant a new mission in nearby Cedar Lake. This area of northwest Indiana is growing rapidly as Chicago commuters look for cheaper alternatives to living in Illinois.

Conway, Ark.: Conway is a growing college town in the northwest of Little Rock with no WELS presence. A group of 19 WELS members has been gathering at a local hotel on Sundays for worship and Bible study with a part-time retired pastor and is getting involved in the community as it prepares to launch a brand-new church.

Easley, S.C.: Since 2016 Abiding Peace in Simpsonville, S.C., has been exploring the option of starting a second site in the greater Greenville area that includes Easley and Powdersville. Abiding Peace is currently offering worship and Bible study and getting involved in community events from a leased “home base” in Easley as it evaluates where a future, permanent site might be established with a new missionary at the helm.

Williston, N.D.: The core group in Williston has been gathering for 15 years, now under the name Lamb of God Lutheran Church. It rents a full-time ministry center where members worship weekly online with the WELS church in Bismarck, N.D., and conduct outreach. Members look forward to reaching out with the gospel with a full-time missionary at the helm.

Seven enhancements were approved: Calvary, Dallas, Texas; Crossroads, Chicago, Ill.; Faith, Prior Lake, Minn.; Good Shepherd, Plymouth, Wis.; Northdale, Tampa, Fla.; St. Marcus, Milwaukee, Wis.; and St. Paul, Calgary, Alberta, Canada.

Read more about these new starts and enhancements at wels100in10.net.

Our pipeline

Home Missions has a pipeline of exploratory missions as we look beyond 2024. This is essential as we seek to be proactive in our preparations to open new missions. District mission boards have identified possible locations in their respective districts. In some places, there is already a group meeting for Bible study and training so they can be prepared when funding is approved and a missionary arrives. Our pipeline enables good planning and faithful stewardship. You can view details on some of these exploratory missions in our pipeline in the interactive Google map found at wels100in10.net. An exploratory mission in our pipeline is not guaranteed funding until formally approved by the Board for Home Missions.

Vicar in a Mission Setting

The Vicar in a Mission Setting program has existed since 1988. Home Missions has partnered with Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary to assign vicars to mission congregations as well as mission-minded congregations. This program has been valuable to Home Missions as it helps prepare future pastors to serve in a mission setting. This current year 15 vicars are serving in a mission setting. Next year that number will be 28. Missions gives thanks for the blessed partnership with Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.

WELS Church Extension Fund, Inc.

WELS Church Extension Fund (CEF) is a valuable partner of WELS Home Missions and the churches it supports. WELS CEF provides home mission churches a 4-to-1 matching grant for initial land purchase based on a 10 percent down payment. It also provides a 2-to-1 matching grant on a home mission congregation’s 10 percent down payment for a facility construction project. Since 1993 CEF has provided \$44.8 million of matching grants to mission congregations and \$14.2 million of special grants to Home Missions.

From fiscal years 2022–24, CEF has provided nearly \$2.5 million in land and facility grants to mission congregations. During that same time, CEF has provided \$3.3 million in grants to Home Missions. These loans and grants to mission congregations enable Home Missions to lower the overall operating costs for the mission, while the special grants to Home Missions help equip our missions with the resources needed to thrive rather than survive in carrying out their ministry plans. We give God thanks for the partnership in the gospel that we share with CEF and its investors.

Lutheran Women’s Missionary Society

Lutheran Women’s Missionary Society (LWMS) is another active and generous partner serving both Home and World Missions. The LWMS produces an annual prayer calendar featuring an aspect of WELS Missions. The LWMS supports the Befriend a Missionary program. At its spring and fall rallies, the LWMS features mission work in North America and around the world. At rallies, offerings are collected so that missions can do “extra ministry” over and above their budgets. At the annual convention in 2023, more than \$100,000 in gifts were given to Home Missions alone. We give thanks to the Lord for all the ways LWMS continues to support Home Missions.

Campus ministry

WELS Campus Ministry, a ministry of WELS Home Missions, provides resources, support, and encouragement to WELS congregations that serve college students around the United States and Canada. These congregations are

vital in connecting college students with fellow Christians, strengthening their faith with the gospel message, and encouraging them to share that faith with other college students. The WELS Campus Ministry Committee currently provides more than 45 campus ministries with financial support and assists hundreds of other congregations in their campus ministry outreach.

Campus Ministry financially supports 11 campus ministries with what is called “significant” funding (anywhere from \$5,000 to \$65,000) and provides another 36 campus ministries with funding usually under \$1,000.

Joint Mission Council

Home Missions works closely with the Board for World Missions and the Board for Ministerial Education through the Joint Mission Council. The Joint Mission Council provides opportunities to coordinate ministry efforts that overlap Home and World Missions. See p. 76 for a full report on the Joint Mission Council.

WELS Mission Journeys

WELS Mission Journeys, the official WELS program for short-term mission trips, provides an opportunity for all WELS members to walk together in the Great Commission. Church- or school-based volunteer trips to WELS mission fields at home and abroad will prayerfully inspire a lifelong journey of service and outreach for all who volunteer. These Mission Journeys teams have the opportunity to be an active outreach partner as WELS looks to start 100 missions in 10 years. These new home mission pastors and core group members will need additional support from volunteers as they reach out to their communities. There is also potential for longer-term volunteer opportunities, placing mission-oriented individuals in strategic locations to assist in forming and developing quality core groups. Learn more about both short- and long-term opportunities and get in touch with Shannon Bohme, Mission Journeys coordinator, at wels.net/missionjourneys.

Administrator vacancy filled

In January 2022, Keith Free accepted a call to serve as pastor at St. John, Mukwonago, Wis. He faithfully served Home Missions for nearly 11 years. In January 2024, Mark Gabb was installed as administrator of WELS Home Missions. Gabb came from St. Paul, Beverly Hills, Fla., where he was also serving as chairman of WELS Board for Home Missions.

With Gabb accepting the call to serve as administrator, we’re thankful that Matt Brown was appointed to serve as the new BHM chairman. Brown previously served on the South Central District Mission Board and currently serves at Abiding Word, Houston, Texas, and is already proving to be a blessing to Home Missions.

We are grateful to Mr. Sean Young, senior director of WELS Missions Operations, for the extra duties he assumed as vacancy administrator. We are also grateful for the team of people we have in the Joint Missions Office who all did their part to carry the extra load during the vacancy.

A look ahead

The direction WELS has given Home Missions with the 100 Missions in 10 Years initiative is clear—aggressively plant new churches throughout North America. We do so fervently praying: “May the favor of the Lord our God rest on us; establish the work of our hands for us—yes, establish the work of our hands” (Psalm 90:17). As we do, we pray for wisdom to be good stewards of the resources the Lord has entrusted to us to carry out the Great Commission. This mission is daunting. It was 2,000 years ago. It is today. Yet, as we see how Christ has blessed his church through the centuries, we trust that he’ll do the same as we carry out “our chief endeavor,” confident that God “is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine” (Ephesians 3:20). To him be the glory!

Rev. Mark Gabb, reporter

Rev. Matthew Brown, chairman of WELS Home Missions

Rev. Frederic Berger, Nebraska Mission District

Mr. Dallas Christ, Nebraska Mission District

Mr. John Deschane, Northern Wisconsin Mission District

Mr. Matthew Dettmann, Colorado Mission District

Rev. Benjamin Enstad, Northern Wisconsin Mission District

Mr. Paul Hahm, North Atlantic Mission District

Mr. Mark Hartman, South Central Mission District

Rev. Mark Henrich, WELS–Canada Mission District

Rev. Jonathan Kolander, Arizona-California Mission District

Rev. Brett Krause, Colorado Mission District
Mr. Scott Krause, Western Wisconsin Mission District
Rev. Paul Learman, Michigan Mission District
Mr. Noel Ledermann, Arizona-California Mission District
Mr. Werner Lomker, WELS-Canada Mission District
Rev. Jeffrey Mahnke, Western Wisconsin Mission District
Mr. David Malnes, Pacific Northwest Mission District
Mr. Thomas Metzger, Michigan Mission District
Rev. Joel Naumann, Campus Ministry Committee
Senior Master Sergeant Gerald Pepke, Dakota-Montana Mission District
Dr. Douglas Rall, South Atlantic Mission District
Mr. Daryl Schultz, Minnesota Mission District
Rev. Kevin Schultz, Pacific Northwest Mission District
Rev. Mark Schutz, Dakota-Montana Mission District
Rev. Nathan Sutton, South Central Mission District
Mr. Scott Stratil, Campus Ministry Committee
Rev. Steven Waldschmidt, Minnesota Mission District
Rev. Kevin Wattles, North Atlantic Mission District
Mr. Steven Wolf, Southeastern Wisconsin Mission District
Rev. Benjamin Zahn, South Atlantic Mission District
Rev. Michael Zarling, Southeastern Wisconsin Mission District

Advisory:

Rev. Mark Gabb, administrator of WELS Board for Home Missions
Rev. Mark Schroeder, WELS president
Mr. Sean Young, senior director of WELS Missions Operations

Board for World Missions

Our calling

Christ's love has done what no human being could ever imagine. He came to this world and gave himself to guarantee our eternity at his side. His love fills our hearts and by God's powerful Spirit overflows to touch the lives of those around us. Christ has called us to keep reaching even further with his love. Our calling includes being witnesses to the multitudes on this planet that still do not know what our loving Savior has done. Earthquakes, hunger, wars, and rumors of war all remind us that this world is not our home, but while we are here, Christ has given us his light to share with the lost. In response to our calling, the Board for World Missions is directed to carry out "the responsibility of sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ for the discipling of all people living outside the United States of America and Canada and those people who, because of cultural barriers, have not been made the responsibility of other agencies of WELS" (WELS Bylaws, Sec. 6.1). Into a world of almost eight billion people that desperately need it, our missionaries and national church partners bring the light of God's Word. The work of World Missions can be summarized like this: "The Word for all, to all, by all." With this powerful tool deployed and in the hands of the Lord of the Church, our work is bearing much fruit.

Our current situation

WELS World Missions conducts and encourages gospel outreach in 46 foreign countries and is exploring outreach opportunities in 19 prospective new mission fields. World Missions brings the light of God's Word through evangelism efforts, church planting, training national workers for ministry, and providing religious materials in foreign languages. Forty-seven world missionaries partner with more than 500 national pastors to conduct

outreach and train more than 400 seminary students for service in Christ's kingdom. More than 300,000 people outside of North America in our partnerships gather in mission settings, national church bodies and beginning church plants to be served by the means of grace. The advance of technology around the world has allowed us to reach with the gospel through the Internet into places that were before unreachable.

The WELS Board for World Missions (BWM) consists of five men called by our synod convention to carry out this work. Board members are listed at the end of this report. This board calls a full-time administrator to work out of the WELS Center for Mission and Ministry, and this administrative function is supported by a director of World Missions Operations and the invaluable help of the staff at the Joint Missions Office.

The ministry of World Missions is divided by the BWM into broad administrative areas according to geography and/or culture. Teams (often referred to as "One Teams") carry out ministry in each area.

The board establishes the teams for these administrative areas. The members of each team are the WELS missionaries called by the BWM to that area and the team's administrative committee, appointed by the board. Another value of the teams is the close integration of three partners—the Pastoral Studies Institute of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, the Commission on Inter-Church Relations, and diaspora ministry facilitators.

The Pastoral Studies Institute of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in collaboration with the Joint Mission Council provides representatives to each team to assist with theological education efforts. They also serve as a connection for maturing national church bodies to the experienced and trusted professors at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.

The Commission on Inter-Church Relations has representatives on each team to assist in WELS' maintenance of relationships with sister synods. WELS world missionaries are often the first, trusted relationship many national church bodies have with WELS. This close connection with the Commission on Inter-Church Relations assures our church body that these maturing churches are taken through a thorough and transparent process to declare and maintain fellowship with WELS and the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference (celc.info), a growing body of 34 national churches around the world that includes WELS.

A diaspora ministry facilitator is appointed to each team. Diaspora ministries refers to ministries with new immigrant or culturally cohesive groups in North America, such as Hmong, Nuer, Hindu, or Native American.

Every country and opportunity has its own story. It would be impossible to report on all the work that is currently going on in this publication. To give you an idea of the scope of this work, visit our website at wels.net/missions to read the latest from the far corners of the globe. While there you can sign up for blogs and reports from our World Missions team and partners.

Here are some highlights from this past year.

The Word for all

Multi-Language Productions is the World Missions arm that develops and translates resources that carry the gospel in the many languages and cultures where WELS supports church work. *Academia Cristo* (academiacristo.com) is a church-planting program, supported by Multi-Language Productions, that trains Spanish speakers to share the gospel in their location and context. Building on this success, the TELL Network (tellnetwork.org) is designed to do the same with second-language English speakers. More than 300 potential TELL church planters are now being paired with WELS missionary mentors to begin house churches in countries all around the globe.

The Word to all

Of course, at the heart of World Missions, plans are made in each region to spread the gospel where people do not yet have it.

In Europe the new mission in London is picking up steam. Two WELS missionaries are partnering with those willing to host Bible studies and gatherings in their neighborhoods. Multiple sites have been identified and have begun gospel outreach connected to a growing hub in London.

In Asia two missionaries have been relocated to Australia to begin work with the growing Hong Kong diaspora. Partnership with existing Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Church partner churches in Australia has been a welcome head start. A new mission is being launched in New Zealand with members of our sister church in Hong Kong. A new missionary has been assigned to live and work in the Philippines, the first WELS missionary in that country.

In Africa new requests for partnership have come from churches in Benin, Ethiopia, Burkina Faso, and the Congo. A growing partnership in Tanzania has been a highlight this year. Our mission team is also adding missionaries this year to meet the growing opportunities uncovered by the TELL Network. Most of the TELL students requesting mentors to plant churches reside in Africa. A new field in Senegal is ready to begin work. Calls are extended to two new missionaries who will relocate to Dakar to explore outreach among the Wolof tribe.

In Latin America 40 new church plants are underway. Every Spanish-speaking country in Latin America is connected in some way to this work. WELS' new sister synod, *Iglesia Cristo WELS Internacional*, is a vital partner in all these efforts. The goal is to have 60 church plants underway by October of this year.

In the Native Christian Network a new missionary accepted the call to New Mexico to begin work among the Navajo tribes. An exciting part of this new outreach plan is to partner with our Apache pastors and leaders to design outreach from Native Christians to Native Americans in the many tribes in North America where Christ is largely unknown.

The Word by all

Everywhere WELS begins or continues mission work, the early training of local leaders is essential. While not always the first thing people think of in world missions, the training of men and women to carry out the Great Commission is the best long-term way to broadly share the gospel. Seminary programs, mentorship of leaders, and manpower dedicated to remote learning programs are vital parts of every One Team. More than 400 students are currently in WELS-assisted pastoral training programs around the world. This work is the vital link to ongoing confessional Lutheranism around the world. It is worth noting again that we are in fellowship with 33 church bodies around the world. We pray we can assist all of them to reach out with the gospel in ways that would be impossible for WELS alone.

A look ahead

Our fellowship of believers outside of the USA is getting ever nearer the number of WELS members. As the size, scope, and complexity of World Missions increase, the Board for World Missions continues to call workers into the Lord's harvest field. This year calling is underway to fill six additional world missionary positions. Work with people yet unreached in Senegal, Thailand, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and the Philippines will fill missionary time this year. To carry out more of this work, the BWM has been looking for ways to fill missionary roles with calls to teachers and laypeople who may be willing to take on a new challenge in a gospel outreach post on a different continent. The Mission Journeys program (wels.net/missionjourneys) has been a great way to engage many WELS members in hands-on experience in a world field. On top of the immediate short-term help, we pray these and other efforts can identify laypeople who are willing to receive on-the-job training and help full time in a world field. Check out the efforts in London to get a taste of how WELS volunteers are helping grow this work (wels.net/a-reason-to-celebrate).

The Board for World Missions is organizing its work to be ready for a worldwide fellowship that may number 750,000 people outside of North America within the decade. If the Lord would bless these emerging churches with that type of growth, it will have a significant impact on what we do together as the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod and the outreach confessional Lutherans can carry out in the world.

Your World Missions team treasures the ongoing support of the members of WELS. Your prayers, attention, and gifts allow us to carry out the witnessing work the Lord has given to us all. May the Lord bless our work together as we hear his calling and take the treasure of Christ's love to share it with a world that will be lost without it.

Rev. Larry M. Schlomer, reporter

Rev. Jonathan Schroeder, chairman

Teacher Matt Doering, secretary

Mr. Arlin Bornschlegl

Rev. Michael Ewart

Mr. Mark Schulz

Advisory:

Mr. Stefan Felgenhauer, director of WELS World Missions Operations

Rev. Paul Nitz, World Missions One Teams counselor

Rev. Larry M. Schlomer, administrator of WELS Board for World Missions

Rev. Mark Schroeder, WELS president

Mr. Sean Young, senior director of WELS Missions Operations

Joint Mission Council

Our calling

WELS Joint Missions supports mission opportunities that are the responsibility of Home Missions, World Missions, and Ministerial Education. Much of this work centers around people group ministries, where immigrants who have joined our fellowship in the United States and Canada are able to take the gospel back to friends, family, and even existing church bodies in their countries of origin. The Joint Mission Council administers the work of the Pastoral Studies Institute of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, assists in other cross-cultural outreach efforts, and supervises programs like WELS Mission Journeys.

Coordination and cooperation are helpful to all of WELS and the church bodies in our fellowship. Since the gospel is for all people, we want to reach everyone even if it is difficult, and the Joint Mission Council is proactively looking for opportunities to make connections by being flexible in structure.

Our current situation

Pastoral Studies Institute

The Pastoral Studies Institute (PSI) of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary facilitates much of the work of the Joint Mission Council. Harland “Skip” Goetzinger (director), David Bivens, and E. Allen Sorum make up the Pastoral Studies Institute Team. They are called jointly by the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Governing Board and the Joint Mission Council.

In Africa, the Pastoral Studies Institute Team is integrated into the One Africa Team in the areas of theological education, consulting, and assisting One Africa Team’s Confessional Lutheran Institute to carry out formal continuing education, seminary consultation, and professional development throughout Africa. Some examples of the work include: 1) collaboration with One Africa Team and the Lutheran Church of Central Africa to offer Bachelors of Divinity (BDiv) and Masters of Theology (MTh) degrees to pastors in our sister church bodies, 2) collaboration with national churches in Kenya and Ethiopia for the training of Nuer pastors in refugee camps in those countries, and 3) consultation with the One Africa Team and the Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ–Kenya on the training and continuing education of pastors.

In Asia, the Pastoral Studies Institute Team is similarly integrated into the Asia One Team to provide strategic coordination of the team’s theological education function. Some specific areas of this work include development of curriculum, organizing course schedules, coordination of visiting instructors, and continuing education workshops. An example of this would be an annual continuing education seminar for the pastors of the church body of our fellowship in Indonesia. The Pastoral Studies Institute Team is also helping to develop the curriculum, organize the course schedule, and arrange the visiting teachers for pastors of the Hmong Fellowship Church who have been chosen to study at the new training center in Hanoi, Vietnam. A second cohort of the Hmong Fellowship Church recently began the program.

In Latin America, the Pastoral Studies Institute Team is consulting with the World Missions One Latin America Team members to determine the partners, the structure, and the program for an online seminary for all Latin American candidates. The Joint Mission Council is also partnering with the One Latin America Team to determine the scope and direction of further Spanish-speaking outreach in North America using the *Academia Cristo* program.

In Europe, the Pastoral Studies Institute Team is integrated into the One Europe Team. Team members assist with continuing education plans for pastors from sister churches across the continent. In Bulgaria, the Pastoral Studies Institute Team works with Gypsy (Roma) outreach sites.

In North America, the Pastoral Studies Institute Team continues to train immigrants to the United States for service to their local people group. More than 30 such men are currently enrolled and are committed to completing the Pastoral Studies Institute training program. Urban Black men in Milwaukee are enrolled in the Joshua Urban Ministry Program. The Pastoral Studies Institute Team also assists the Native American Committee as requested.

Diaspora ministry

When immigrants are dispersed in other countries in large numbers, they are free to organize themselves into

congregations, seek spiritual leadership, and teach the gospel to people in other countries and back home. This type of work is often called diaspora ministry, and the Joint Mission Council appoints diaspora ministry facilitators to help wherever they are able. Neil Birkholz, North American Asian mission counselor, oversees the diaspora ministry facilitators' work. Other diaspora ministry facilitators include Aaron Bublitz (Africa), Julius Buelow (Europe), Leon Ehler (Asia), Jeff Gunn (Native American missions), and Larry Schlomer (Latin America).

Mission Journeys

WELS Mission Journeys, the official WELS program for short-term mission trips, provides an opportunity for all WELS members to walk together in the Great Commission. Through church- or school-based volunteer trips to WELS mission fields at home and abroad, members can engage in Christian service. Pre-trip training led by a congregational team leader equips volunteers to have significant impact during their trip. While volunteering, the learning and sharing of outreach ideas allow teams to explore how they can use their God-given abilities to lead an outreach event upon their return home. With the Lord's blessing, these trips will inspire a lifelong journey of service and outreach for all who volunteer.

Campus ministry for international students

In a normal year, almost 400 international students enroll at WELS elementary and high schools. Connecting them to one another, to believers of our fellowship from their people group, and to WELS congregations when they transfer schools is a large undertaking. Daniel Lindner, the Campus Ministry mission counselor for all campus ministries, directs some special attention to international students. Neil Birkholz, North American Asian mission counselor, is assisting Lindner in this work.

Individual efforts

The Joint Mission Council has identified people from Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, Colombia, Cuba, India, Korea, Liberia, Mexico, Pakistan, South Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, Vietnam, and other countries who have interest in training to take the gospel to their own people groups here in the United States and in their countries of origin.

Pastor Paul, a Pakistani man who relocated to the U.S. due to security concerns, leads outreach to Hindus in the greater Milwaukee area. Small-group Bible studies, family fun nights, driver's education classes, and English classes are just a few of the ways Pastor Paul and his wife reach out in love to their community. Another man leads outreach to Muslims in three countries, including the United States.

Opportunities seem to arise daily for us to take the gospel to all nations.

Rev. Paul Prange, reporter

Rev. Paul Prange, chairman

Mr. Stefan Felgenhauer, director of WELS World Missions Operations

Rev. Mark Gabb, administrator of WELS Board for Home Missions

Rev. Harland Goetzinger, director of the Pastoral Studies Institute of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary

Rev. Larry M. Schlomer, administrator of WELS Board for World Missions

Mr. Sean Young, senior director of WELS Missions Operations

Board for Ministerial Education

Our calling

“**A**nd the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Timothy 2:2).

The scriptural purpose of our ministerial education program is the preparation of candidates for the public ministry of the gospel. Pastors, teachers, staff ministers, and missionaries are prepared to proclaim Christ’s love in the congregations, schools, and mission fields of our fellowship. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and Martin Luther College also include in their purpose the continuing education of those who already serve in the ministry of the gospel. Our report gives you an overview of the efforts to coordinate the work. The WELS Resource Center always has the most recent reports from the individual schools at bme.welsrc.net.

Our current situation

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (WLS), Mequon, Wis., offers theological training for men who intend to enter the pastoral ministry of WELS. It serves both first-career and non-traditional students. It began the year with 148 enrolled. The graduating class in May 2023 was 37, compared to 25 in 2022. We are pleased to see 40 students assigned as vicars in 2024. Grow in Grace, the institute for pastoral growth at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, offers opportunities for the theological and professional growth of called workers already serving in the ministry of our confessional fellowship. The Pastoral Studies Institute of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary guides the preparation of men who would like to serve only their own people groups as evangelists or pastors. For the sake of reviewing its domestic programs, and to offer support for our sister schools overseas, WLS is in the process of accreditation by the Association of Theological Schools. WLS is also in the middle of a strategic planning process that will guide it in determining ministry priorities and potential campus improvements like expanded classroom facilities. More information is available on p. 93 and at wisluthsem.org.

Martin Luther College

Martin Luther College (MLC), New Ulm, Minn., is the WELS College of Ministry. It trains men and women to meet the public ministry needs of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod and to proclaim the Word of God faithfully and in accord with the Lutheran Confessions in the Book of Concord. Efforts to address the current shortage of pastor and teacher candidates at the college level are detailed in the Ministry Recruitment Task Force report, which is found as an appendix to this report, on p. 81. MLC began the second semester of the 2023–24 school year with 579 undergraduates—153 in the preseminary track, 401 in the education track, 14 preparing for staff ministry, and 11 undeclared. MLC is seeing fruits of synodwide prayers for more workers preparing for the harvest field. More than 1,000 students are enrolled in continuing education and graduate studies programs. Students are already enrolled in classes that will prepare them to enter the new Competency-Based Education program, specially designed for non-traditional students. Four new tiers of early childhood training are available for more than 1,000 WELS workers who need professional or ministerial certification. More information is available on p. 98 and at mlc-wels.edu.

Michigan Lutheran Seminary

Michigan Lutheran Seminary (MLS) is a boarding high school in Saginaw, Mich., with the single purpose of preparing high school students for the public ministry of the gospel and encouraging them to enroll at Martin Luther College. Michigan Lutheran Seminary receives grants from the MLS Foundation, including financial assistance and sponsorship of capital improvements. Michigan Lutheran Seminary began the year with 192 students. More information is available on p. 109 and at mlsem.org.

Luther Preparatory School

Luther Preparatory School (LPS) is a boarding high school in Watertown, Wis., with the single purpose of encouraging and preparing young people for a lifetime of service in the public ministry of WELS. Luther Preparatory School participates in the Racine, Milwaukee, and Wisconsin Parental Choice Programs, allowing some Wisconsin families to use vouchers from the state to pay for the cost of education. Luther Preparatory School began the year with 410 students. More information is available on p. 112 and at lps.wels.net.

Finances

The Board for Ministerial Education distributes synod support to the ministerial education schools from a block grant supplied by the Synodical Council. The model has resulted in stable reserves and normal annual tuition increases at all the schools. While its reserves are strong, MLC has begun intensive work to address a structural deficit. MLC has seen blessings on its efforts to address the educational debt of its graduates, with decreases in the average debt owed by its graduates for four straight years, and the average debt of the last two years' graduates under 50 percent of their first-year salaries. The college has established programs to train students in good stewardship and to increase funds available for student assistance. The Congregational Partner Grant Program has increased its matching funds for tuition assistance provided by congregations to students who attend MLC. In partnership with incoming students, parents, and generous donors, the college has the attainable goal of providing enough financial aid resources that no freshman should have to take a loan for education purposes.

Vacancy rates

Parish pastor vacancies in WELS remain a concern. The average graduating class size at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary should be larger than the past decade for the foreseeable future. Martin Luther College is giving attention to increased support for non-traditional preseminary students. After some lean years, Michigan Lutheran Seminary and Luther Preparatory School are seeing increasing numbers of their graduates entering the preseminary course at MLC. Vacancies in principal and early childhood director positions remain difficult to fill. The 21st-Century Lutheran Principal Initiative, approved by the 2017 synod convention, is a process to recruit and fully train experienced teachers to serve as principals and should help with the principal vacancy rate. A similar program is being considered for early childhood directors. The MLC initiative to recruit and certify non-traditional students as classroom teachers using competency-based educational models should also be helpful. See more details in the Ministry Recruitment Task Force report on p. 81.

Capital projects

Capital campaigns for buildings at the schools are reviewed and adopted by both the Synodical Council and the Conference of Presidents as a regular part of WELS' ministry planning process and then are conducted in coordination with the Ministry of Christian Giving. Funding models that include the prudent use of debt are being considered using the new Synod Capital Projects Fund, which is explained more fully in the Synodical Council's report on p. 39. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary is investigating improvements in both classroom facilities and gathering space. Martin Luther College dedicated its new Betty Kohn Fieldhouse and has begun significant improvements to existing student housing. Michigan Lutheran Seminary improved its athletic facilities with new outdoor bleachers, restrooms, and a press box with funding provided by the MLS Foundation. Luther Preparatory School is planning for a new music auditorium. The Lord gives us our daily bread, and we are grateful that the campuses are well maintained, with very few continuing maintenance projects unfunded in the ministry plan for the current biennium.

Partnerships

With the blessing and encouragement of the administrations of Home and World Missions, the ministerial education schools have established good partnerships with the world mission fields and self-supporting overseas churches in our fellowship to help develop their ministerial education programs. In the past few years, we have seen a dramatic increase in requests to the Pastoral Studies Institute of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary for help in training existing pastors and evangelists of various people groups to become confessional Lutherans. The reports of the Joint Mission Council (p. 76) and the Commission on Inter-Church Relations (p. 17) detail some of those efforts. Our domestic ministerial education schools have seen some success in their plan to increase the numbers of under-represented minorities on their campuses and in their programs.

A look ahead

We give thanks that the Lord of the Church continues to supply our synod with young men and women who are willing to serve anywhere that the Church needs them. It's an extraordinary blessing that they believe that the Bible is the infallible Word of God and that they treasure the precious Lutheran heritage of proclaiming the unconditional

gospel that has been passed to our generation with remarkable clarity. We are grateful that they present themselves for service as faithful ministers of the gospel who subscribe without reservation to the Lutheran Confessions. We also give thanks for the individual congregations and members in those congregations who still think—contrary to the practice of just about every other national church body—that the investment of energy and financial resources in the thorough preparation of candidates for the public ministry of the gospel and the deepening of those who are already serving is a sound and wise synodical commitment.

What can you do to help? Pray! Ask the Lord of the harvest to send more workers into his harvest fields. See the Ministry Recruitment Task Force report (below) for additional suggestions.

Rev. Paul Prange, reporter

Rev. Duane Rodewald, chairman

Rev. John Bortulin, secretary

Mr. Paul Hahm

Teacher James Henrickson Jr.

Teacher Daniel Markgraf

Rev. Andrew Retberg

Rev. Jonathan Scharf

Mr. Brian Scheele

Rev. Timothy Spaude

Mr. Dean Waldschmidt

Rev. Michael Woldt

Mr. Adam Zastrow

Teacher Gerald Zeamer

Advisory:

Rev. Matthew Crass, Luther Preparatory School president

Mr. Kyle Egan, WELS chief financial officer and treasurer

Rev. Richard Gurgel, Martin Luther College president

Rev. Mark Luetzow, Michigan Lutheran Seminary president

Rev. Paul Prange, administrator of WELS Board for Ministerial Education

Rev. Mark Schroeder, WELS president

Rev. Earle Treptow, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary president

Appendix: Report of the Ministry Recruitment Task Force

The 2023 WELS synod convention adopted two resolutions encouraging the formation of a Ministry Recruitment Task Force. President Schroeder appointed this task force in October 2023. It is our privilege to serve and to bring you the following explanations and recommendations.

There is a teacher shortage

A Teacher Shortage Task Force met from April to October 2022. It clearly identified a growing teacher shortage. Each year after all the available graduates from Martin Luther College (MLC) are assigned to classrooms, the number of positions still to be filled has been 50 in 2020, 90 in 2021, 140 in 2022, and 158 in 2023. Total new teachers in the fall of 2023 included around 100 MLC graduates, around 100 WELS teachers returning to the classroom, and around 100 WELS members who were public school teachers but were provisionally called to teach in Lutheran schools. All three of those pipelines have a ceiling. The fact that there are 100 former WELS teachers available to return to the classroom every year demonstrates that retention is an issue, especially at places where teaching is more difficult for various reasons. At the same time, WELS schools report that they anticipate growing 3 percent year-over-year for the next three years.

The main reason for increasing teaching vacancies is the increasing enrollment. Out of a global pandemic and societal changes across our country, God opened the doors of our WELS schools to more and more families seeking a different educational path for their children. Funding models that include state vouchers and admissions models that include non-member students have been the chief contributors to the rapid increase in enrollments.

The teacher shortage will continue and may worsen

We know that the future of the Church and her needs is in the hands of our living Lord, and we know that our predictions have proven inaccurate in the past. Nevertheless, we believe that it is a matter of good stewardship to make plans based on our best predictions.

Predicting the number of teachers WELS will need in the future requires first forecasting expected enrollment. The challenge is the student makeup in WELS schools is rapidly evolving. Consider these three categories of families for our schools: 1) WELS students, 2) unchurched and non-Christian students (student and parent prospects to evangelize), and 3) other-Christian students (may belong to a Christian church not within our fellowship).

We can make informed estimates about how many WELS students will enroll in our Lutheran schools in the future. WELS tracks annual births. In years evenly divisible by five, congregations submit age-group demographics. This data enables us to clearly see that our historic member group of students is declining. For example, WELS congregations reported 59,000 members ages 0 to 14 in 2015. In 2020, they reported 53,500 members in that demographic, representing a 2.4 percent year-over-year decline, paralleling the decline in birth rate in years prior.

Forecasting the potential number of interested families from those other groups—unchurched and other-Christian households—is more challenging. We know interest in parochial education is rising rapidly. We do not know if there is a ceiling on that interest. We do not know how many states will embrace or walk away from school choice programs, which provide the financial means for more parents to seek parochial education. Therefore, future interest by those two groups is impossible to predict. It seems likely in the short term the interest is only going to rise.

From school year 2018–19 to school year 2023–24, total enrollment in our Lutheran elementary schools (LES) grew 4.2 percent year-over-year. Enrollment by unchurched/non-Christian students increased 13.9 percent year-over-year. Enrollment of other-Christian students increased 11.7 percent year-over-year. But WELS/ELS (Evangelical Lutheran Synod) enrollment declined 0.7 percent year-over-year. In the past two decades, enrollment at all levels of WELS schools (early childhood ministry, LES, area Lutheran high schools, prep schools) rose 17 percent. Enrollment by WELS students declined 30 percent during that time.

The continued growth in enrollment suggests that WELS should expand every possible pipeline of future teachers. It is necessary to acknowledge that even with all those pipelines wide open, it seems unfeasible for a church body our size to supply enough teachers to keep up with the current rate of enrollment growth. This has already proven true in early childhood ministries (ECMs).

It would appear to be helpful to develop a shared philosophy of ministry to help us prioritize our efforts to serve WELS students, unchurched students, and other-Christian students. Failure to develop a shared philosophy of ministry and a corresponding controlled growth plan poses multiple risks. Unmanaged growth could steer WELS schools onto a path where the need for teachers could result in pressure to hire non-Lutheran/Christian teachers. Since the identity of our WELS schools has always included God's Word being integrated throughout the day and throughout the curriculum, unmanaged growth has the potential to impact our identity and our mission.

All of our Lutheran educators should be able to articulate and demonstrate the reasons for the nature of genuinely Lutheran education. MLC has done an excellent job teaching and inculcating those values and traits. The Conference of Presidents (COP) relies on MLC to provide ministerial certification for all teachers in all our schools. MLC should be commended for stepping up and providing programs to meet the exact needs of WELS at this time, including online ministry certification courses, competency-based education courses for elementary school teachers, and a broad range of courses for those serving in ECMs at all levels.

Specific remedies for the teacher shortage

RECOMMENDATION #1

That all WELS schools enroll all existing teachers who are not ministry certified in the appropriate level of MLC courses to achieve ministry certification.

Such courses include

- ministry certification courses, all online, for teachers at all levels who have a bachelor's degree in education from institutions other than MLC;

- competency-based education courses, all online, for WELS members who have an associate degree or a bachelor's degree in areas other than education and are teaching or intending to teach at the elementary level; and
- early childhood support for teachers in the field.

Tier one: 25 free training modules to be used by directors to on-board and locally train new hires.

Tier two: Three one-credit online courses to provide the required training to earn the Child Development Association (CDA) Credential in one semester.

Tier three: An 18-credit online program, Teaching Ministry Certification for Early Childhood Teachers, providing the theological and professional training for ministry in a Lutheran context. Together with the CDA Credential, it can qualify a teacher to be "locally called" by a congregation.

Tier four: An online Associate Degree in Early Childhood Education (preschool only) for currently serving WELS early childhood teachers. The ideal candidate has some college background already.

RECOMMENDATION #2

That the Conference of Presidents (COP) commission a white paper to develop a shared philosophy of ministry to guide our efforts, considering some questions such as these:

1. Is it theologically accurate to say that we should not be teaching kids in our schools who are members of another church body and therefore under a different shepherd? Should we avoid enrolling such students on theological grounds?
2. Is it theologically accurate to say that if parents who are members at other churches want to place their children under our theological care, it is our responsibility to teach them the unconditional gospel as long as they listen and conform to the beliefs and standards of our schools? Should we enroll such students on theological grounds?
3. Can and should our district presidents prioritize the provision of teaching candidates to schools that have demonstrated effective programs to help unchurched students and their parents become children of God and members of their congregations?
4. What would it look like for all our schools to have a shared philosophy of ministry and a corresponding controlled growth plan?

We are aware that there are implications in the management of growth at all educational levels for the COP to consider based on the answers to these questions.

There is a pastor shortage

WELS presently has more than 160 pastoral vacancies (just under 12 percent). At least one out of ten congregations in WELS is experiencing a pastoral vacancy. There are congregations being served by a vacancy pastor rather than their own pastor for over a year. Such lengthy arrangements can be detrimental to the ministry plans of both the vacant congregation and the home congregation of the vacancy pastor.

One reason for our current shortage is a decade (2012–2022) of smaller than usual seminary classes due to our synod's earlier fiscal crisis (2003–2009). Morale was hurt during the crisis by bringing missionaries home. Enrollment in our ministerial education schools dropped sharply when we raised tuition by over 10 percent a year in 2003–2005 without corresponding increases in financial assistance. In the subsequent years when we talked about closing our prep schools, our most reliable source of pre-seminary students, both the prep school enrollment and their production for the MLC pre-seminary program were suppressed. Seminary graduating classes from 2003–2011 averaged 41. Seminary graduating classes 2012–2022 suddenly averaged 28. We thank God that beginning in 2023, seminary graduating classes are trending toward the 30s.

The current graduating numbers from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (WLS) could have been even higher. Unfortunately, some WLS classes have shrunk between matriculation and commencement. Some attrition has always occurred in seminary classes. In the recent past, a higher percentage of men have discontinued their preparation for pastoral ministry. This trend is a matter of serious concern for WLS. The WLS president has an exit interview with every student who decides to withdraw. Central to the conversation is the man's reason for discontinuing preparation for ministry. The primary reason given is that the man has decided that he does not wish to be a pastor. To a man, the students who withdraw from the seminary express great appreciation for their time in the program. They thank God for the blessings he granted through it, increasing their faith and opening their eyes to new insights. When asked to identify other factors that led to their decision, some withdrawing students note that it is difficult to complete all the work assigned, because they do not have the same motivation as those who were

eager to serve as pastors. Others speak of being tired of school in general, especially when many people their age have left the academic setting behind. In the end, though, all say that the primary reason for withdrawing is their conviction that pastoral ministry is not for them.

The most recent school year demonstrates that the higher attrition rate may have been temporary. There has been an increased emphasis on the advising system. Each student has a faculty member serving as his advisor. The advisor meets regularly with his advisee and talks with the student about his desire to serve in pastoral ministry and offers encouragement. In addition, professors frequently speak in class about the joys of serving people with the gospel, even amid challenges, to help students keep the end goal of their studies in mind. The faculty has also taken steps to ensure that student workload expectations are reasonable. Early field experiences are on the increase.

We also investigated whether the current shortage is caused by pastorally trained men serving outside the parish. The current report lists 1,363 pastoral positions. One thousand two hundred four pastors (88.7 percent) have as their primary responsibility serving laity with Word and sacrament. One hundred fifty-four pastors (11.3 percent) are in a ministry where serving laity with Word and sacrament is not their primary responsibility. That 11.3 percent is below historic averages (13.6 percent in 1956; 13.0 percent in 1990). We find value in pastorally trained men serving in high schools and other areas where their influence can help young men see the virtues of pastoral ministry.

We recognize and appreciate that, across the board, consideration is given about which non-parish responsibilities can be given to laymen that would reduce the need for pastorally trained positions outside the parish. This is evidenced by a 1 percent drop in pastorally trained men serving outside the parish over the past three years.

The pastor shortage may improve

We know that the future of the Church and her needs is in the hands of our living Lord, and we know that our predictions have proven inaccurate in the past. Nevertheless, we believe that it is a matter of good stewardship to make plans based on our best predictions.

Currently, 1.4 percent of WELS' active full-time pastors are age 70 or older. Using an average retirement age of 70, we would expect to average about 23 retirements a year over the next 5 years (2024–2028). Retirements of pastors would then rise, averaging closer to 29 annually over the next decade as all Baby Boomers (currently aged 60 to 69) and the older GenXers reach retirement age. Around 2040, we would expect to see retirements trend down some, closer to 24 to 25 annually. They would rise again slightly in the late 2040s, due to some larger classes from the turn of the century reaching retirement age.

Over the last 20 years, WELS has typically had between five and seven pastors leave the ministry annually for something other than retirement. This includes things like resignations and deaths. This number has improved significantly over the last decade. Adding retirements with other types of attrition would suggest that to maintain current pastoral ministry efforts synodwide, we need WLS graduating classes to be about 28 now, rising to about 34 around the end of this decade and holding there for at least ten years.

However, these predictions assume that WELS maintains approximately 1,240 congregations. In the past six years, church closures and consolidations have increased. Over that period, for the first time in 60 years, WELS has fewer churches each year than the year previous. Even with WELS Board for Home Missions' 100 in 10 initiative, total closures and consolidations have led to an annual net decline in the number of churches. We expect this to accelerate over the next decade.

What is impossible to predict is whether the demand for pastorally trained men in non-parish roles will increase. For example, we expect the desire of other-churched and unchurched parents to provide parochial education for their children to increase. It is hard to predict how the expansion of area Lutheran high schools will affect demand for pastors. The same holds true for other WELS-affiliated ministries.

If we assume the demand for pastorally trained men in those non-parish roles does not increase, and we assume the rate of closures/consolidations will trend slightly upward, it suggests that if WLS senior graduating classes averaged in the low 30s over the next decade, the vacancy rate would trend down slowly, returning to approximately 5 percent by 2035. If the graduating classes average less than that, the vacancy rate would remain higher. We will always need workers.

Beyond that, the ongoing pastoral demand will be tied to whether WELS' statistical decline maintains its current rate of around 2 percent annually or levels out. This leads to another way of thinking about the synodwide need for

parish pastors: looking at the ratio of parish pastors to total membership. In 1990, that ratio was approximately 1:360. Currently, it is closer to 1:280. If WELS had the 1990 ratio today, it would call for 240 fewer in-parish pastoral positions. Obviously, that is not feasible for a variety of reasons, including the geographic deployment of congregations and the increased demands for pastoral counseling. This is simply meant to illustrate that it would be a mistake to forecast pastoral needs assuming that current pastoral service opportunities will remain steady.

Remedies for the existing shortages

General remedies

When we search the Scriptures for insight on shortages of ministers of the gospel, we find a direct word of Jesus on the subject. “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. So ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest field” (Luke 10:2).

RECOMMENDATION #3

That we each pray for workers.

Loving God and Lord, instill in the hearts of our children a desire to follow you as they prepare for future days. Help them distinguish between what is passing and what is eternal, between instant thrills and lasting joy. Encourage more young people to prepare for service in the public ministry of the gospel. Mold us and move us to be good examples for our youth. Amen.

Understanding what it means to recruit

We want to be clear about what we are encouraging the Church to recruit to: candidacy for the public ministry of the gospel in the name of the Lord and of his Church. Only the outward call from Christ through his Church actually puts someone into the public ministry, yet the inner desire to serve in the ministry of the gospel (1 Timothy 3:1) is precisely what we seek to nurture in the hearts of many in the next generation.

We also want to be clear about the Church’s need for qualified (1 Timothy 3; 2 Timothy 2:2 and 3:15) candidates. Hence, no matter the preparation process for the potential candidate, qualifying a candidate or ascertaining if a candidate already has those qualities is essential in the faithful Church. There is no such thing as allowing people to serve in the public ministry just because they want to serve.

The faithful Church has remarkable liberty to choose exactly what is required in our time and in our place to be qualified for candidacy for the public ministry of the gospel. Clearly, to serve in the public ministry as a Lutheran teacher of first graders requires different theological and educational depth compared to the scope of ministry into which the pastor will be called. WELS has historically chosen to give as much of a liberal arts education as is possible to each candidate on the undergraduate level in addition to as much theological depth as is possible in a normal four-year course of studies. WELS has historically chosen to require, if possible, the candidate for the teaching ministry and the preseminary level candidate for the pastoral ministry to attend our own synodically-owned and subsidized campus. We are unique in Christendom in this view of the Lutheran teaching ministry as public gospel ministry in its own right and in this approach to pastoral preparation. Our students entering Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary have already been doing exegesis of the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament.

We recognize that where, by the grace of God, there is a high regard for the Word of God, a high regard for the public ministry of the gospel will also exist.

The Lord of the Church has promised that the gates of hell will not prevail against the Church, and so we trust that there will always be qualified public servants of the Word of God to serve our Lord’s Church and to liberate humans from their self-chosen deities or from their slavish attempts to live under the law of God and to free them to live freely and faithfully in Christ. May the Lord keep that promise through us rather than without us.

Personally addressing the need to recruit

Most called workers can tell the story of why they began to consider ministry in the first place. Perhaps a young man grew up watching his father be an excellent pastor like his father before him. Maybe a young woman fell in love with early childhood ministry because of her high school job and the mentorship she found from her veteran coworkers there. It seems clear that the Holy Spirit uses human connections to do his work here on earth.

It makes perfect sense that our ministerial education schools would concentrate on sharing their message far and wide. “We take great care in creating a great environment to equip you to do ministry!” Let official school recruiters

give tuition assistance details, show slideshows of their schools, and talk about their programs. But ministerial education school recruiters are limited in the impact they can have.

Individuals in every corner of WELS need to be told clearly and often that they are the best recruiters for public ministry. Grandparents, parents, youth group leaders, and Lenten dinner soup cooks all have unique relationships with young people in their families and congregations. A word from them about how great a teen is with kids is as good as gold. An encouragement from a pastor to consider pastoral ministry after a boy gives a confirmation class presentation is a huge deal. Recruitment of public school students is nearly completely dependent on such interactions.

A veteran pastor says, "I always recruit for ministry, not for particular ministerial education schools. Students will surely end up going to those places, but I recruit for ministry, and the schools become necessary challenges and blessings to help God's children get to do ministry for and with Jesus."

RECOMMENDATION #4

That we each recruit people for the ministry of the gospel.

Individual recruitment for the ministry of the gospel includes praying for individuals; facilitating their continued faithful involvement with Word and sacrament in their congregations; speaking positively about local pastors, teachers, staff ministers, and missionaries; arranging service opportunities with those ministers of the gospel; encouraging use of ministerial education school programs at appropriate levels; and many other acts of affirmation.

Corporately addressing the opportunity to recruit

As we each individually search for opportunities to recruit, we can get creative with how we remind one another that this is a way we can bless our church body for generations.

The issue of faithful recruitment to candidacy for the public ministry of the gospel needs to be owned in our synod by every congregation, school, and entity. A promotional program has to target individual influencers of the young people. We need to help prospective influencers see themselves as influencers of young people to consider ministry.

Let us also recognize the blessing that we have in entities that can lead us in the recruitment effort. We have a dedicated ministerial education office at the synodical level. We have our WELS-owned and supported seminary, a ministerial education terminal school for Lutheran teachers and staff ministers, a pre-seminary program of liberal arts education on the undergraduate level at that same school, and two preparatory schools whose purpose is to encourage and prepare for the next stage of candidacy preparation.

RECOMMENDATION #5

That the Ministerial Education Office craft an aggressive ongoing promotional program for synodwide recruitment.

The program may include one additional recruiter per district, frequent reminders for individual and congregational recruitment, Bible studies, worship planning resources, devotions for students at all levels, ideas for age-appropriate tastes of ministry, ideas for student assistance, links to resources from the ministerial education schools, age-appropriate print materials, social media posts, and many other encouragements for recruitment activity.

Remedies at the high school level

Understanding the young people whom we are recruiting

Most of the high school class of 2024 was born in 2005 and 2006. They were learning their first words when the iPhone was introduced. Generation Z is the classification of those born between 1997 and 2012, and since about 2020, they are represented by every traditional student who graduates from Martin Luther College. Beginning next year, every classroom at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary will also be full of Gen Z men. Sociologists observe ruefully that in the worst cases, Gen Z is tech-addicted, chronically depressed, lazy, entitled, and irreligious.

It's no secret that young people today are more prone to mental health issues than possibly any generation that has come before them. They are constant witnesses to the relentless positivity presented by users of the Internet and social media, which creates a growing void between what life seemingly could be and what it truly is. Some have questioned whether people are talking more about mental health because more people are struggling or if more people are struggling because people are talking about mental health. The number of young people who are apparently struggling could be influenced in part by an increased cultural willingness to seek help. Regardless, depression has skyrocketed in just a few years, a trend that appears among Blacks, Whites, and Hispanics, in all regions of the United States, across socioeconomic classes, and in both large and small towns.

In many ways, Gen Z's relationship with the Internet and social media could be directly related to their uptick in mental health issues. But the digital world is not all bad. If the perception of social media, e-mail, and lightning-quick search engines were overwhelmingly negative, the average person wouldn't spend three-plus hours on their phone every day (seven-plus for teenagers). The root of the issue lies not in the fact that our young people have been exposed to the Internet, but that they haven't experienced life without it. Once we've accepted the reality of the Internet, once we've acknowledged what it represents in the lives of our young people, we need to decide what we're going to do with that information. The situation calls for a very intentional moderation. We must be sure to assist young people in finding appropriate uses for the Internet like a father guides his child's first strokes with a hammer. That which could be used to harm people and damage property is also valuable in supporting new ways to reach out with the gospel.

Gen Z is more likely than any generation before them to be raised by religiously unaffiliated parents. Without parental direction, individualism and a rejection of moral absolutes predominate, leaving young people especially vulnerable during their high school and college years. There is nothing in this world better able to pierce the dense fog of ideologies than Scripture itself. This is why the retention of young church members in their most vulnerable years is so important. If young people see no reason to be involved with church, they will not even begin to consider serving in one vocationally. This generational trend highlights a potential blind spot in the current model of WELS parish ministry. Traditional confirmation class concludes for 14-year-olds in the spring of their eighth-grade year. In many cases, this also marks the end of the church's ministry efforts targeted toward them. While some churches set the bar high when it comes to youth ministry, the majority have no specialized effort. An increased emphasis on mentoring young people through their years of maturing faith could produce just the type we're looking for at our ministerial education schools. Our often-absent young people could turn into active members of our congregations, beneficiaries of rich intergenerational relationships, and eager mentors of those who look like they did just a few years prior.

RECOMMENDATION #6

That WELS Congregational Services develop resources to assist congregations in their ministry with high school and college students through age 25.

Encouraging area Lutheran high schools

Veterans of our area Lutheran high school system are well aware of how the schools maintain their historical average of 8 percent of the WELS students matriculating to MLC. Key positive factors are usually popular students and popular faculty members encouraging ministry, particularly boys and girls as teachers. The percentage of non-WELS students in attendance at a given school and the promotion of popular non-ministerial programs of study are factors to consider. MLC already offers online courses for college credit to high school students.

RECOMMENDATION #7

That the Martin Luther College courses offered for online study to high school students be packaged as a pre-ministerial program and combined at the local level with age-appropriate tastes of ministry.

Encouraging preparatory schools

Veterans of our prep schools, Michigan Lutheran Seminary (MLS) and Luther Preparatory School (LPS), are well aware of how the schools maintain their historical average of 48 percent of the students matriculating to MLC. Key factors are usually students identifying with the single purpose of the school and picturing themselves in later service, particularly boys as pastors.

The preparatory schools want elementary-aged students and their parents to know that the average student comes only willing to be encouraged for a life of service in ministry, not already committed to it. MLS and LPS have enough financial assistance dollars available that no family situation should prevent anyone from trying the schools.

RECOMMENDATION #8

That our synodwide promotional program encourage enrollment of students at our preparatory schools.

Remedies at the college level

Maintaining undergraduate enrollment at Martin Luther College (MLC)

MLC plays a central role in the WELS ministry recruitment effort. Because we value the gospel and the people who bring it to us, we want them to have the best possible college education. MLC carries out that role for WELS.

MLC is affected by the same trends as other American colleges. For approximately the past 20 years, the birth rate in the United States has been in sharp decline. Those in secondary education talk about the "enrollment cliff" that will begin around 2025, as that birth rate decline begins to result in an increasingly smaller college-aged population.

A birth rate decline has occurred in WELS as well. In 2005, just over 7,000 children were born to WELS couples. Since then, the birth rate within WELS has been trending down and currently is closer to 3,000 births annually. That decline will increasingly impact enrollment at all WELS schools. In Lutheran elementary schools and area Lutheran high schools, enrollments may remain stable as more unchurched and other-churched students enroll. But at Martin Luther College, which has the singular purpose of training WELS members for gospel ministry, the decline in birth rate will be more challenging to mitigate. Long term, we believe the decline in WELS' birth rate will present a major challenge to MLC's residential undergraduate enrollment. Unless the Lord would grant WELS with growth, each year a smaller pool of college-aged WELS members exists. Without that growth, to maintain enrollment levels at MLC, we will need all WELS-affiliated high schools to achieve a higher percentage of seniors going on to MLC. We acknowledge there is a natural ceiling on how many seniors that could be.

In the short term, we believe it is possible Martin Luther College will actually see enrollment rise somewhat. In recent years, the percentages of seniors at our preparatory schools and area Lutheran high schools that went on to MLC hit historic lows for a variety of reasons, including the impact of COVID-19. However, we believe that in the next couple years both the preparatory schools and area Lutheran high schools will revert to having a percent of seniors attend MLC that is closer to the historic averages (approximately 48 percent from the preparatory schools and 8 percent from area Lutheran high schools). This would result in MLC's opening undergraduate enrollment rising in the 600s for the next few years, before trending down again below 600 around the beginning of the next decade.

Long term, to maintain residential undergraduate enrollment levels at MLC, we will need all WELS-affiliated high schools to achieve a higher percentage of seniors going on to MLC along with an increasing number of WELS students matriculating at MLC from public high schools.

Lowering undergraduate costs at MLC

Most American colleges are facing the same demographic challenges. There are teacher shortages across the U.S. Many institutions are reacting by lowering costs for undergraduates in order to recruit more of them, especially in the area of education. MLC developed its own financial assistance task force to develop the following goals.

RECOMMENDATION #9

That donors continue to validate MLC's formal goal of reducing the average educational debt of all MLC graduates so that it is at or below 50 percent of the base starting salary of a WELS first-year teacher.

MLC met this goal in the summer of 2023 and is on track to continue meeting it because of the generosity of WELS donors. MLC's Congregational Partner Grant Program, where the congregations of MLC students contribute financial assistance and MLC matches their contribution up to a certain amount, has been very helpful in meeting this goal. Preseminary students accumulate no additional educational debt at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary because of the generosity of WELS donors.

RECOMMENDATION #10

That donors continue to validate MLC's formal goal of increasing financial assistance for the average student by 10 percent per year.

MLC has been meeting this goal every year since 2022 because of the generosity of WELS donors. Average student assistance at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary exceeds the cost of tuition because of the generosity of WELS donors.

RECOMMENDATION #11

That donors validate MLC's formal goal to prioritize the allocation of MLC financial aid so that first-year students will not normally be compelled by financial necessity to take on any educational debt.

MLC is on track to meet this goal by 2027 in partnership with incoming students and their parents or guardians because of the generosity of WELS donors. Students at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary are presently not compelled by financial necessity to take on any educational debt because of the generosity of WELS donors.

RECOMMENDATION #12

That donors validate MLC's informal goal that no first-year student would have to pay more than \$9,999 in total cost (tuition, room, board, fees).

Because of the generosity of WELS donors, MLC has the resources to meet this goal right now but not yet for the long term. Donors who wish to make this possible for the long term should contact the MLC Mission Advancement office. Such a goal has already been reached at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary because of the generosity of WELS

donors. Conventional wisdom is that students should pay something rather than nothing in order to have some personal investment in their college training.

Pointing out the benefits of campus life at Martin Luther College

Martin Luther College is blessed to be centered in an excellent location for an amazing small college experience. The 50-acre campus sits on a beautiful wooded hill overlooking the city of New Ulm, Minn. About 25 miles from Mankato and 90 miles from Minneapolis/St. Paul, MLC students have easy access to big-city venues while enjoying the small-town charm of this Minnesota Star City of 14,000. The campus includes four residence halls; an academic center; a library and media center; a student union with cafeteria, gym, and fitness center; a 900-seat auditorium; two music halls with practice rooms; and outdoor athletic facilities including a disc golf course and a low ropes course. The campus cornerstone is the Chapel of the Christ, a 1,200-seat chapel where services are held almost every day during the school year with one of the largest organs in the Midwest. Just a few blocks from the main campus is an early childhood learning center as well as expansive off-campus athletic fields and the new Betty Kohn Fieldhouse, an indoor turf facility. MLC professors are veteran pastors and teachers who bring a wealth of experience to their distinctively Lutheran classrooms. While it is a sacrifice for some to relocate to Minnesota, our task force believes that the sacrifice is worthwhile.

The majority of currently-serving WELS pastors did their preseminary training on the MLC campus. The vast majority of WELS teachers received their first calls after their schooling on the MLC campus. Both of those groups recruit naturally to a campus they know. But a growing number of WELS teachers who know MLC only from its online ministerial certification courses need to find out more about our campus in New Ulm, Minn., in order to become better recruiters of the young people in their care.

RECOMMENDATION #13

That the MLC Alumni Relations office be tasked with developing a program that introduces WELS teachers who did not graduate from MLC to the undergraduate campus experience for which they will be recruiting.

The MLC Alumni Relations office can also consider connecting with pastors who graduated from the WELS preseminary program before 1996 and have not had children go to college on the MLC campus.

Expanding opportunities to be trained by MLC offsite

The mission of Martin Luther College is to train men and women to meet the public ministry needs of WELS. At this moment in history our WELS needs are expanding, especially in the area of teachers. MLC is to be commended for recently developing four tiers of assistance to meet WELS needs in professional and ministerial certification of teachers at the early childhood level. By survey MLC has identified that these programs should meet the needs of over 1,000 people already serving. Our recommendation #1 above is that schools take the initiative to enroll those students. We also see the need for MLC to devote special attention to these programs.

RECOMMENDATION #14

That WELS Commission on Lutheran Schools assign someone to take the initiative to work with each WELS early childhood ministry on how to enroll each of their workers in the appropriate tier of professional and/or ministerial certification.

In the past, ministry certification and professional licensure were difficult for students who were unable or unlikely to have their residential college experience at MLC because of life circumstances, ethnicity, or geography. But now competency-based educational models are under development. MLC has made it possible for any existing WELS school to serve as a satellite location for MLC ministry certification, professional licensure, or continuing education. Local pastors, MLC professors, and adjunct instructors are all in a good position to aid in such efforts.

RECOMMENDATION #15

That anyone desiring to serve as a WELS teacher but unable to participate in residential college life at MLC should contact Dr. John Meyer (meyerjd@mlc-wels.edu) to determine the best course of study.

RECOMMENDATION #16

That any WELS school desiring to serve as a satellite location for a cohort of students in educational studies should contact Dr. John Meyer (meyerjd@mlc-wels.edu) to determine how to begin such a program.

Providing such opportunities for nontraditional students is not a threat to replace the valuable residential undergraduate college experience for traditional students.

The MLC Staff Ministry program has proven valuable to WELS. As congregations make their ministry plans in view of our current called worker shortages, they might consider calling local WELS people who already have degrees to serve provisionally as staff ministers. These people might not be able to take residential classes at MLC. MLC might consider creating a graduate-level theology certificate for such staff ministers.

RECOMMENDATION #17

That the MLC Office of Graduate Studies and Continuing Education work with the MLC Staff Ministry program and the Conference of Presidents to develop a certificate of theology for WELS people called as staff ministers in their home congregations.

Remedies at the seminary level

MLC and WELS Commission on Lutheran Schools (CLS) partner in keeping track of those who have withdrawn from MLC or who have graduated from MLC with education degrees but are not presently in WELS classrooms. Contact with those people has proven valuable for CLS as it provides call lists for many unique circumstances.

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary has taken responsibility for keeping in contact with men who have withdrawn from training for pastoral ministry but not necessarily in a systematic way. Someone should also take responsibility for keeping in contact with men who have resigned from pastoral ministry for reasons other than cause.

RECOMMENDATION #18

That the WLS faculty discuss how it might keep in contact with men who have withdrawn from training for pastoral ministry or from the pastoral ministry itself in order to have the opportunity to encourage them as appropriate.

Support for those already in the ministry

One regularly hears that those who serve in public ministry must make many sacrifices. Near the top of that list is the idea that those who serve as pastors, teachers, staff ministers, and missionaries must give up any hope of a comfortable life financially. Called workers must work long hours, the story goes, without receiving compensation in any way commensurate with their responsibilities.

It is true that WELS called workers do not receive a salary that will lead to inclusion on a list of the highest-paying professions. That is not to say, however, that they are being asked to live in poverty. Thirty-five years ago, before WELS took a hard look at the compensation package being provided for called workers, someone could have made an argument that those receiving compensation according to synod code were being asked to make a financial sacrifice. Since then, the synod made a significant adjustment to the compensation schedule to ensure that public ministers of the gospel are receiving compensation that shows honor to those laboring in the gospel and allows them to devote themselves fully to the Lord's work.

In 2016, the synod's Compensation Review Committee made additional revisions to the compensation guidelines. Just as importantly, the synod provided a helpful called worker compensation calculator to make it far easier for calling bodies to determine appropriate support for their workers. The Compensation Review Committee used that opportunity to emphasize to calling bodies the importance of carefully and prayerfully considering how to take care of the servants the Lord had given them. The compensation package includes a salary that takes into consideration the worker's responsibilities, educational attainment, and where the individual serves. The package also includes one half of the self-employed social security tax for ministers of the gospel, as well as providing health insurance and housing. Those last two items may not always be appreciated as they ought to be.

The Compensation Review Committee continues to improve the guidelines. Calling bodies who request a candidate from MLC or WLS are required to show they are providing compensation that meets or exceeds the guidelines.

Telling the full story of called worker compensation requires mention of special tax treatment for pastors, teachers, staff ministers, and missionaries as ministers of the gospel, which allows declaration of a portion of their salary as a parsonage allowance, thus reducing the amount of income subject to taxes. Whatever is spent on housing, utilities, and furnishings can be excluded from taxable compensation. That is a significant benefit that makes the salary they receive go much further.

In addition, the Lord's people love those who proclaim the gospel to them and their children, and they show it. They regularly provide gifts directly to called workers and support them in other ways. They often treat the Lord's servants like members of their family. That needs to be shared regularly with young people who are considering the different ways in which they might serve the Lord with their lives.

Part of encouraging morale for men and women entering the teaching and staff ministries is to support realistic expectations for service. Asking people to perform duties for which they are not trained can be disheartening. Unrealistic calling bodies can inadvertently or callously cause toxic work atmospheres.

Part of encouraging morale for men entering the pastoral ministry is supporting the men currently serving. In a time of pastoral vacancies, it seems important to watch for the possibility of burnout. Increasing the number of men entering pastoral ministry only to have a growing number of resignations would hinder our efforts to address the shortage of pastors in our synod.

There are some good things in place to support our called workers. Over the last five years, nearly all the graduates of WLS have opted to have a mentor during their first three years of ministry through the Pastor Partners mentoring initiative. Nearly all the graduates of MLC have participated in the New Teacher Induction program. Statistics demonstrate that these mentoring efforts have, humanly speaking, reduced the number of resignations in the early years of ministry. Grow in Grace, the seminary's continuing education institute, sponsors ministry anniversary retreats aimed at helping pastors find renewed joy in their privileged work. Circuit pastors seek to encourage and support the men and women in their circuits in their challenges. Districts have funds available to assist with the costs of counseling for pastors, teachers, and staff ministers who are hurting mentally and spiritually. Many congregations have a Care Committee for Called Workers, which provides called workers an opportunity to be open about their challenges and for congregations to offer support in various ways.

Perhaps more could be done to hold up the prophet's hands. Pastors themselves could make it a priority to find a brother in ministry to whom they could confess and from whom they could hear the Savior's word of forgiveness. That absolution equips a pastor to return to the work with a clear conscience and a settled peace, grateful for the privilege of being the Lord's instrument to bless others. A donor could consider funding retreats for pastors aimed at providing spiritual refreshment and encouragement in ministry beyond the special ministry anniversaries presently offered by Grow in Grace.

Supporting pastors, teachers, staff ministers, and missionaries in their ongoing labors will help with the recruitment of another generation of called workers. Gospel ministers who feel supported in ministry carry out their work with joy and zeal. Young people notice the joy they have in ministering to the saints and reaching out to the lost, and they begin to think about becoming called workers themselves. In addition, called workers who feel supported in ministry speak more positively of the honor of serving in the public ministry and are much more likely to encourage young people to prepare for service to the Lord and his Church.

In the end, serving in the public ministry is, as the apostle Paul says, a grace. No greater privilege could be given to a person who is by nature sinful and therefore unworthy to serve as the Lord's messenger. To be the Lord's instrument to speak the good news of forgiveness in Christ and to prepare people for eternal life is an honor and a joy. Getting to spend life fully engaged in sharing the life-giving Word with others and not having to work a side job to pay the bills is an extraordinary gift. Many called gospel servants have thought along the way, "I should have to pay to do this! Instead, God's people support me so that I am free to do what I love."

RECOMMENDATION #19

That each congregation, school, and mission agency seeks to meet or exceed the synod's guidelines for compensation of called workers.

Our task force heard the suggestion that the former tuition rebate program be reinstated. This was a program where the synod kept a certain percentage of the tuition money that students paid at the ministerial education schools and then reimbursed it to graduates after a certain number of years of service. We decided not to recommend reinstating the program. The accounting for the original program was difficult, and it would be difficult to restart under the same terms. If we must choose between funding a program like this or funding financial assistance while a student is enrolled, the task force recommends funding financial assistance.

But if a program could be devised whereby a graduate of MLC or WLS receives a certain grant after a certain number of years of service as an expression of gratitude from a grateful church body, it might be helpful. Certain donors might be interested in funding such a program. It might be part of our overall efforts to encourage persistence in the ministry.

At WLS, the Grow in Grace program works to encourage retention in the ministry by Pastor Partners and other initiatives. At MLC, the New Teacher Induction program works to encourage retention in the ministry in a growing number of ways.

RECOMMENDATION #20

That the WLS Grow in Grace and the MLC New Teacher Induction leaders discuss a graduate gratitude grant program, recommending the timing, amounts, and funding sources of such a program to the synod president.

Remedies we discussed but are not recommending

We heard the suggestion that the two preparatory schools be defunded, that the money be given instead as subsidy to MLC every year, and that MLC use it either to lower costs for students or to recruit students to make up for what the prep schools would have produced. We also heard the suggestion that the prep schools be closed and that their faculties be distributed one-by-one to each of the area Lutheran high schools to encourage recruitment there. Similar suggestions were discussed by the Prep School Study Committees of 1990 and 2005. We decided that the proposals would risk the reliable annual production of students from the prep schools at a time when we are working hard to increase both enrollment at and production from them as a helpful remedy for our current shortages.

Since half of all WELS members live in Wisconsin, it is logical that we heard the question of whether the WELS college of ministry should be located in Wisconsin. Students who are driving to MLC from Wisconsin must ask themselves this question all the time! In the 1960s, WELS discussed that issue and decided that the college for teacher training should be in New Ulm, Minn., even with an existing WELS junior college for teacher training at the time in Milwaukee, Wis. Thirty years later, in the 1990s, WELS discussed the issue once more and ended up moving the preseminary college-level program from Watertown, Wis., to Minnesota. Thirty years later, our committee looked at the issue again.

We know that Martin Luther College professors are willing to serve anywhere that the Church asks them to serve. It is the same attitude that they seek to instill in their students. That is not an issue.

MLC admissions officers routinely ask personnel at WELS high schools in Wisconsin and Michigan about students who prefer to stay closer to home. Estimating the number of additional traditional students who might prepare for ministry at a hypothetical college in Wisconsin is difficult, since the students themselves usually have many other factors they are considering as well. Sometimes it is their parents who would prefer them closer to home even when they would be fine studying farther away. At present, Wisconsin students who go to school in Minnesota indicate their willingness to serve anywhere upon graduation, and our task force discussed whether having more students studying at the college level closer to home in Wisconsin might change that dynamic.

Our task force asked WELS campus ministries in Wisconsin to identify students who were attending those Wisconsin colleges but indicated interest in serving in WELS ministry. We asked permission to interview them to gain more nuanced data. Our interviews turned up no students who chose to attend public colleges in Wisconsin rather than MLC simply because of location. Rather the reasons cited centered mostly on available programs and related costs. A broader study of WELS students attending public colleges and universities found that a majority of them see geographic isolation as a weakness.

We were especially interested in whether the location of the WELS college of ministry in Wisconsin might make it more likely for Black and Hispanic students from our congregations in Milwaukee to enroll there. We surveyed groups of Black and Hispanic WELS students from Milwaukee and discovered that there are multiple factors in play, none of them simple, and none of them solvable by a simple relocation of the WELS college of ministry. We also surveyed Hispanic WELS members from Doral, Fla., and discovered that it might be best for a school in Florida to form a cohort and serve as a satellite location for the appropriate MLC courses (see Recommendation #16).

We consulted with Dr. Eric Fulcomer of the Wisconsin Association of Independent Colleges and Universities. He informed us that any college or university established or re-established in Wisconsin after 1992 is under the jurisdiction of the Department of Safety and Professional Services (DSPS) Educational Approval Program (EAP). The statutory reference is 440.52 (1)(e)(1), and the EAP comes with its own set of political and regulatory challenges.

We made an attempt to calculate costs. We looked at the difference between Wisconsin state support for Wisconsin students attending Wisconsin colleges vs. Minnesota state support for Minnesota students attending Minnesota colleges, and it was nearly a wash. Relocation costs for the college were estimated at \$5,600,000. We presumed that a brand-new fully-appointed campus would cost approximately \$270,000,000. We assumed that a sale of the New Ulm campus would net \$25,000,000. We are unaware of existing campuses in Wisconsin that would meet our needs and are available. We finally determined that the numbers did not yield a good cost-benefit ratio for moving the campus of our college of ministry to Wisconsin.

We heard the suggestion of combining Martin Luther College and Wisconsin Lutheran College (WLC). We were unwilling to suggest the necessary changes to WLC's governance, which works well now outside the corporate synod structure. We strongly validate the broader mission of WLC, which is providing quality teaching, scholarship, and service that are rooted in Holy Scripture. We observed that whenever the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS) combined its ministerial education high schools and colleges with its more broadly purposed LCMS high schools and colleges, the ministerial education programs were mostly lost.

We heard the suggestion of offering a special theological course online for men who might be interested in studying the Bible, and then using that course to identify men who are interested in becoming WELS and entering pastoral training. We see that this method is being used to recruit men and women for ELCA seminaries at this time. We also heard the suggestion of considering models like *Academia Cristo* and TELL, currently used by WELS World Missions to identify potential congregational leaders in places where we presently have no congregations of our fellowship.

Our task force commends our WELS World Missions planners for devising methods that work well to identify potential leaders in places where we have no current presence. The Pastoral Studies Institute of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary is pleased to partner with its World Missions partners to provide the best possible seminary training for such candidates.

For English speakers in North America, however, we highly value the time and presence that we are able to devote to training ministers of the gospel. When those candidates come from our existing congregations and schools rather than from online courses, we know them much better and have many more opportunities to demonstrate Lutheran ministry to them. Such an opportunity in a time of peace and prosperity is a great blessing from the Lord, which we do not take for granted.

Rev. Paul Prange, reporter

Rev. Jonathan Hein

Rev. Philip Hirsch

Mr. Theodore Klug

Rev. Donald Patterson

Rev. Paul Prange

Mr. Cameron Schroeder

Rev. Earle Treptow

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary

Our calling

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (WLS) equips pastors for the worldwide mission of WELS, including churches and cultural groups within its confessional fellowship. In partnership with sister seminaries and theological training programs of its fellowship, WLS accomplishes that singular purpose with two distinct emphases. Primarily, the seminary prepares men to begin pastoral ministry by providing the spiritual, theological, and professional training needed to enter that ministry. The seminary also partners with pastors in their ministry-long pursuit of spiritual, theological, and professional growth.

Our current situation

Enrollment

The 2023–24 school year began with an enrollment of 134 students, down from the 148 that began the previous school year. While the incoming class matched the graduating class, a higher number of students than normal withdrew either during the 2022–23 school year or in the summer following it. Exit interviews with each withdrawing student revealed no consistent reason beyond the man's conviction that he would like to serve the Lord in a different vocation. They had come to the seminary to give it a try, not at all certain that they wanted to become pastors. Every student that withdrew expressed great appreciation for the opportunity to study at the

seminary, even if it was only for a year. To a man they thanked God for the growth in faith and knowledge they experienced through their time on campus. Faculty members work hard to maintain open lines of communication with students, to encourage them on the challenging road to ministry, and to offer counsel to those who struggle with vocational uncertainty. As of this writing, only one student has withdrawn from the seminary this year. One student who had stepped out during the second semester last year returned, meaning the enrollment remains the same.

Twenty-seven men will complete their seminary training this year, with 26 available for assignment. One of the graduates has decided not to present himself for assignment into the ministerium of WELS. Forty men will be assigned, Lord willing, to serve as vicars, an increase of 12 over the current vicar class.

It was a joy last year to write a report for the *Book of Reports and Memorials* and share the good news that 37 candidates for ministry would be presented to the Assignment Committee. That was an increase of 12 over the previous year. While 37 candidates wouldn't address even a third of the vacancies, it felt like reason to rejoice, because it was the largest class of new pastors for more than a decade. There is reason for rejoicing this year, too, because the Lord has answered the prayers of his people for workers for his harvest field. That it may not be the number we may have desired doesn't change the fact that each of these pastors is a gift from the Lord to his church.

There's no question that we need more pastors. We know that, not primarily from the vacancy statistics in our church body, but from Jesus' words, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few" (Matthew 9:37). There will never be a time when we can say, "There's no need any longer to encourage young people to consider the pastoral ministry for their life's work." Pastors, teachers, and staff ministers need to think about the future and speak with gifted young people about the importance and privilege of serving in the public ministry. Perhaps even more importantly, the members of our congregations need speak highly of the public ministry and those who serve in public ministry, so that young people can see how much God's people value gospel servants. If young people see how important public ministry is and the eternal impact the Lord can have on people through them, they are more likely to see ministry as the privilege it is and consider it seriously.

The 2024–25 school year will likely begin with an enrollment around 145, with incoming students exceeding the number of men being assigned to serve as pastors. It's worth noting that the Lord hasn't just provided statistics. He has raised up talented men, with intellectual and personal gifts that would allow them to serve well in many different vocations, who are willing to consider serving him and his people in pastoral ministry.

Faculty

Men who graduated from the seminary just ten years ago never had the chance to study with two-thirds of the current seminary faculty. From 2015 to 2024, 13 men have joined the seminary faculty. That is significant turnover on a faculty of 18. A former professor suggested that it takes at least five years on the faculty for a professor to feel comfortable and confident with the work entrusted to him. Many of the men called within the last nine years are pursuing additional coursework to be even better equipped for the work the Lord has given them. The governing board is committed to supporting every faculty member who desires to pursue an advanced degree, both with funding for the program and with a reduced teaching load to accommodate the additional study required of them.

This past year Jon Micheel, Steve Pagels, Paul Waldschmidt, and Rob Wendland celebrated their 25th anniversaries in the pastoral ministry. God be praised for blessing them and making them a blessing to many!

Field services

Vicars

The vicar year remains a critical portion of every student's training for pastoral ministry. While extremely beneficial, the program does carry a significant cost. For the 2024–25 school year, it will be \$47,280 for each vicar. That amount doesn't all go directly to the vicar. It provides health insurance for all the vicars and their families, subsidizes rental costs for all, and provides a modest stipend for the vicar so that he can give his full time to ministry and not seek other employment to cover his costs. On average, about 10 to 12 congregations that apply for a vicar have the resources to cover the full cost for the year. That means approximately two-thirds of each vicar class will be assigned to congregations that are only able to cover a portion of the cost.

The seminary has worked in partnership with the Board for Home Missions (BHM) and its Vicar in a Mission Setting program to identify places where a vicar could receive excellent training in gospel outreach in a mission-minded congregation. The BHM and WLS cooperate financially in the program. The seminary commits between \$200,000 and \$250,000 on an annual basis to that program. The seminary has also partnered with the Board for

World Missions to support a vicar in Colombia, working with a pastor in our sister church body. The larger vicar class for the 2024–25 school year means that the seminary will have to invest additional funds to ensure placement of all vicars. The need for gifts to support the vicar year is critical as we gear up for larger classes in the next two years.

Each summer, the seminary provides a seminar to equip supervising pastors for their important work of overseeing vicars. Faculty members explain the training the vicars have received and outline the experiences they hope the students will have in their vicar congregation. Each new supervising pastor is expected to attend; experienced supervising pastors are asked to participate in a training seminar at least once every five years. We thank the Lord of the Church for the many faithful pastors (and supportive congregations) who are willing to invest significant time and money in the training of a future pastor.

Early field training

The early field training program has been in place for two decades. In it, first- and second-year students are assigned to a Milwaukee-area congregation. They attend services each week and get involved in different activities to gain perspective on congregational life, with the goal of preparing them for their vicar year. The program is primarily Sunday-focused at present, in recognition of the students' busy schedules during the week. Four of the congregations participating in the program offer seminarians with Spanish abilities the opportunity to use them in ministry.

Student ministry program

Seminary students work part-time jobs during the school year to help cover their living costs. Most work in secular jobs and take advantage of opportunities to witness as they work alongside others. Some of the students work in ministry positions. During the 2023–24 school year, 15 seniors are serving in a ministry position, with responsibilities in preaching, teaching, and visitation. Some receive housing as part of their compensation. Ten underclassmen are serving in ministry positions with duties that fit the training they have received.

Education costs

The total cost of education at present is a little more than \$30,000 per student per year. Thankfully, no student has to cover that entire cost out of his own pocket. Tuition and fees for the 2023–24 school year were a little more than \$13,000. The difference in cost of education is addressed partially through the portion of WELS Congregation Mission Offerings designated for the seminary and primarily through the many generous gifts God's people offer directly to the seminary for financial aid. The gifts offered in the last four years have been nothing short of extraordinary. Except for one year, the gifts offered each year have set new records for support for tuition assistance. The students who live in the dormitory pay approximately \$9,600 for room and board. Most married students, who are on their own to secure housing, pay more for housing and food.

In the 2023–24 school year, thanks to the generosity of the many people who give regularly to support the seminary's scholarship fund, every student who applied for financial assistance received aid to help defray the costs of attending. All told, the seminary disbursed approximately \$830,000 from its general scholarship fund to assist students. Most of that came in the form of grants based on the student's declared financial need. There were also campus service awards, which acknowledge students who carry out tasks for the well-being of the seminary family, and academic achievement awards, which honor classroom performance as reflected in the student's grades. Donors have also provided additional gifts for students that are not reflected in the number above. On average, students at the seminary received assistance that exceeded the tuition costs for the year. Many also received assistance to defray their costs for room and board (or housing and food for the married students).

Student indebtedness remains a concern, given the increasing costs of education. The seminary has no interest in seeing students enter full-time service in the church with a crippling debt, because it will have a negative impact on their ability to serve in ministry. The excellent work being done at MLC in financial planning has made a positive impact on student indebtedness. The seminary offers annual financial presentations, as well as private guidance as needed, to build on what has been begun at MLC. The seminary's financial aid officer, Steve Geiger, carefully monitors student debt. Students do not leave the seminary with more debt than that with which they entered, though they may acquire additional debt through marriage.

Accreditation

The seminary is pursuing accreditation through the Commission on Accrediting of the Association of Theological Schools (ATS). The ATS is a membership organization of more than 270 graduate schools that conducts academic degree and postbaccalaureate programs. As part of the accreditation process, the seminary conducted a self-study aimed at assessing its work in light of the commission's ten accreditation standards. Those standards are principles-

based rather than best-practices-based. In other words, the commission is not insisting that a school desiring accreditation must have certain practices or policies in place to become an accredited school. Representatives from ATS have repeatedly said they will not ask WLS to act contrary to its doctrinal position or at cross purposes with its mission. They understand that WLS is a professional seminary, focused on preparing men for service as pastors and missionaries in WELS. They expect a school that sees its work as “pastors forming pastors” will have a faculty whose members have significant experience as pastors and missionaries. The stated desire of ATS is to help schools become even better versions of themselves by encouraging them to engage in ongoing assessment of their programs.

Kenneth Cherney, Jr. served as the chairman of the self-study steering committee and guided the process. The faculty completed the self-study this fall and submitted its report at the beginning of December 2023. A comprehensive evaluation visit for initial accreditation has been scheduled for mid-April 2024. A final decision on the request for accreditation should be received by mid-June 2024.

The seminary is seeking accreditation for several reasons. The governing board and faculty take seriously the task the synod has entrusted to the seminary, to prepare men with the character, knowledge, and skills required to serve as pastors in WELS. The self-study has led the faculty and governing board to seek feedback from synodical stakeholders and on that basis discuss important questions of how best to form faithful Lutheran pastors for service in the contemporary world. Those critical conversations are the first step on the road to strengthening and expanding the seminary’s work. Accreditation also commits the seminary to ongoing assessment of everything being done, with an eye on continuing to improve the way in which men are being prepared for service to the Lord and his Church. Having objective outside eyes review the self-study report and offer suggestions regarding areas in which WLS could improve will also be helpful. Additionally, becoming an accredited institution promises to be beneficial for the work the seminary does in assisting sister church bodies around the world in providing training and degrees for their pastors. It will also be easier for international students to enroll and will facilitate WLS graduates’ enrollment in post-graduate programs.

Governing board

The Michigan District presidium appointed Eric Steinbrenner to fill a vacancy on the board. Nathan Wagenknecht, who had served on the board since July 2020, accepted a call out of the Pacific Northwest District and must therefore step down from his work on the governing board. We thank the Lord for his contributions to the board and the seminary. The Pacific Northwest District will elect a replacement, Lord willing, at its convention.

Pastoral Studies Institute

The Pastoral Studies Institute (PSI) of WLS, in collaboration with WELS Joint Mission Council, continues to oversee pastoral training for men from various ethnic groups—Vietnamese, Hmong, and Sudanese, to name a few—in places across North America. The PSI Team consists of Harland (Skip) Goetzinger, who serves as the director; E. Allen Sorum; and David Bivens. Bivens has a reduced teaching load in both semesters to allow him to travel and to teach both semesters. Sorum has a full schedule of teaching at the seminary in the second semester but not the first, freeing him up to travel and teach.

Members of the PSI Team have designed individual study plans for all 33 men in North America currently enrolled in the training program. Members of the team provide some of the instruction, while also working with local pastors who teach other courses in the program’s four levels. An additional eight men have expressed interest in the program. The prayer is that the men being prepared for ministry will not only be able to pastor a flock of their people group but will also be able to assist in bringing the gospel to their country of origin, as the Lord provides opportunities.

Members of the PSI Team, who are called jointly by the seminary’s governing board and WELS Joint Mission Council, work with each World Missions “One Team.” Their duties and responsibilities vary by field, from vetting mission opportunities to providing instruction to developing curriculum to offering counsel on various aspects of mission and ministry. The PSI Team collaborates with the One Team leader and the group that WELS is seeking to reach to determine the best way for WELS to facilitate distinctively Lutheran ministries led by solidly Lutheran native leaders.

Grow in Grace

Grow in Grace, the institute for pastoral growth at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, partners with pastors for lifelong growth in their callings. Grow in Grace offers courses and events, retreats and mentoring, study packages, and informal resources, all intended to encourage and equip pastors to serve where the Lord has placed them. God’s people always benefit when their pastors stretch themselves with additional study, even if the study doesn’t seem immediately connected to daily ministry duties.

Brad Wordell, who has served as the director of Grow in Grace since January 2022, has worked with staff and committee members on a significant revision of the master of sacred theology (STM) program as part of the accreditation self-study. The number of credits required for the degree has been reduced, from 32 to 24, while the number of hours required per credit has increased. Each credit represents 45 hours of work. Students can choose from nine focus areas. The goals of the program are to encourage and equip confessional Lutheran pastors for a lifetime of growth, to preserve and deepen the attitudes and commitments cultivated in the seminary's MDiv program, and to partner with pastors for growth in various areas of theology and ministry. There are 34 men currently in active pursuit of an STM. Many more have taken courses, but they have not yet requested an advisor and stated their desire to complete the program.

Online courses are offered in fall, spring, and summer, and have been well attended. Plans are in the works to offer two to three online courses for each session. Last summer, Grow in Grace took courses on the road into nine districts. In the even-numbered summers, summer quarter returns to campus. This summer, Lord willing, there will be increased enrollment in face-to-face courses, with pastors able to take advantage of the many benefits associated with being on campus, like daily worship in the chapel, access to the library, and opportunities to talk with brothers in ministry outside of the classroom.

Each spring Grow in Grace arranges ministry celebration retreats for pastors and their wives celebrating 3-, 10-, 25-, and 35-year ministry anniversaries. The retreats provide collaborative opportunities for pastors to learn from one another and to gather with peers celebrating similar ministry milestones. Grow in Grace also oversees a program of mentoring for new pastors during the first three years of their service as pastors. Experienced pastors are trained for the important work of encouraging new pastors as they take up the work of shepherding a congregation.

A look ahead

Building plans

The seminary's current strategic plan, adopted in 2020, called for the development of a plan to update or add classrooms, large- and small-group educational and gathering space, and accessible faculty offices. The current buildings have served the seminary well for the nearly one hundred years the seminary has been on the Mequon campus, but there is an opportunity to make helpful improvements. The classrooms are undersized and lack natural light. Most faculty members do not have office space on campus to meet privately with students during the school day or to work together more readily with colleagues. Small-group educational spaces and a large gathering area for students and their families do not exist. Simply put, the current facilities are not equipped to serve today's students, especially when it comes to the collaborative parts of learning.

During the 2021–22 school year, the seminary worked with HGA, a Milwaukee architectural firm that had done the chapel renovation in 2005, to develop a master site plan. The plan includes a proposed education center with six new classrooms, a link between the current library and the new education center, the conversion of current classrooms into office space and small-group meeting areas, and a gathering hall connected to the current auditorium/gymnasium.

The Synodical Council directed the seminary governing board to conduct a financial feasibility study to ascertain the support that God's people might offer for such a building project. The governing board approved working with Generis, a financial consultant, to carry out that feasibility study. That process is underway, with a final report to be provided well in advance of the Synodical Council's November 2024 meeting.

A building project would be a great way to mark the 2029 celebration of one hundred years of the Lord's grace on the current campus in Mequon.

Rev. Earle Treptow, reporter

Rev. Jonathan Scharf, chairman

Teacher Philip Stern, secretary

Mr. Gregory Green

Mr. Thomas Kissinger

Mr. Clayton Raasch

Rev. Eric Steinbrenner

Rev. Nathan Wagenknecht

Rev. Karl Walther

Advisory:

Rev. Jonathan Balge, adjunct member

Rev. Daniel Leyrer, Southeastern Wisconsin District president

Rev. Paul Prange, administrator of WELS Board for Ministerial Education

Rev. Mark Schroeder, WELS president

Rev. Earle Treptow, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary president

Martin Luther College

Our calling

It is a challenging time for many higher education institutions. Hundreds have closed in the past decade. Trends would indicate that hundreds more may disappear in the current decade. Many of those institutions that have closed, or are in danger of closing in the future, long ago lost track of their unique purpose for existing. In the midst of that challenge, we have a great blessing at Martin Luther College (MLC) in having a clear and unchanging mission as the WELS college of ministry. The mission of MLC is to train men and women to meet the public ministry needs of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) and to proclaim the Word of God faithfully and in accord with the Lutheran Confessions in the Book of Concord. To fulfill this mission, Martin Luther College carries out all instruction and programs of student life according to the gospel as revealed in the inspired and inerrant Word of God.

Our current situation

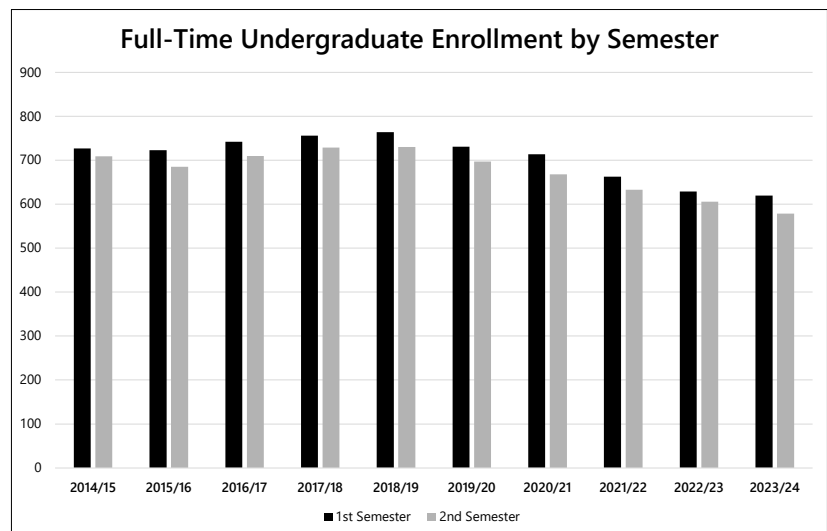
We are thankful to God for his many gifts to us as your college of ministry. They are too many to enumerate, but this report seeks to list various key parts of God’s gracious gifts to us at MLC.

God’s gifts to MLC: Our undergraduate students

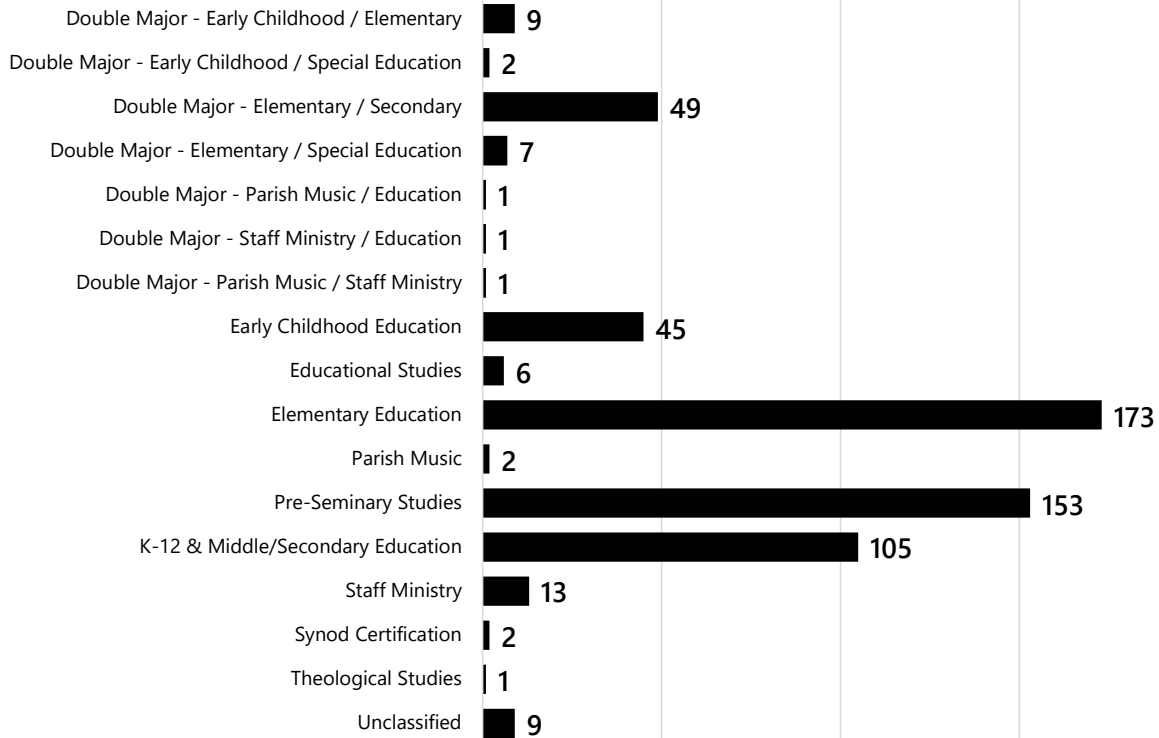
The opening enrollment for fall 2023 was 620 full-time undergraduates. The enrollment at the beginning of the second semester was 579. Mid-year enrollment changes occur because of mid-year graduates, transfers to MLC, and students departing MLC. We give thanks for each student as a unique gift of God. Yet we are also concerned for a fifth consecutive year of decreasing enrollment, a 19 percent reduction over that time period. The divergent reality of increasing vacancies in our synod and decreasing on-campus enrollment at MLC underlines the significant need to do precisely what Jesus urged us to do: to pray for more workers in his harvest field (Matthew 9:38). That prayer Jesus calls us to pray gains extra urgency as we consider the almost stunning new opportunities before us to reach the world with the gospel and as we ponder the miracle of God’s grace of increased enrollment in so many of our WELS schools.

No small part of God’s answer to that prayer is to open our eyes to see gifted young people in our families and our congregations whom we can encourage for ministry. Please also consider those who are older who might consider pursuing the preaching or teaching ministry or staff ministry as a change of career. Such non-traditional students are also a great blessing to our college of ministry.

The chart at the top of the following page is a breakdown of the number of undergraduate students in each program of study at the beginning of our second semester of the 2023–24 school year.



Full-Time Undergraduates by Program of Study



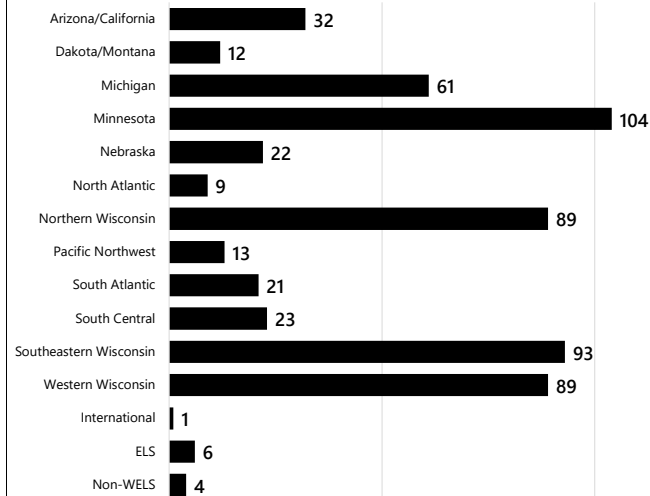
Fifty percent of current undergraduate students came from area Lutheran high schools, followed by 36 percent from the synod's two preparatory high schools, and 11 percent from public high schools. The chart below depicts the various synodical districts that our students call home.

God's gifts to MLC: Undergraduate academic programs

Martin Luther College is dedicated to continually studying and growing its undergraduate program through regularly-scheduled reviews. God has blessed MLC program reviews immensely through this reflective process of self-study, accountability, and improvement of its programs. These improvements include:

- The pre-seminary program has implemented its new Early Ministry Experience (EME) requirement for young men training for the pastoral ministry. First- and second-year students spend time with a WELS pastor, experience a Daylight mission trip, and engage in adjusted coursework helping their written and delivered devotional training. Expanded minors in the pre-seminary program (still to include non-biblical language options) will be implemented for students enrolling in this major in fall 2025.
- Middle and secondary education major professors have implemented new courses with the sole purpose of better preparing these candidates for the eventual assignment into elementary classrooms they may choose to consider based on their more limited training in specific content areas. The courses give them a head start in pedagogy across multiple subject areas, including the teaching of religion classes in the upper elementary grade

Full-Time Undergraduate Students by District



levels. The admissions/entrance requirements for candidates seeking these more focused teacher degrees/licenses continue to be fine-tuned, and MLC has restructured its education program committee system.

- Courses have been added to the elementary education major, and the order that courses are taken has been revised to enhance retention. Special attention is being given to classroom management practices and communication, training candidates toward high expectations for various aspects of good pedagogy and lesson planning.
- Our early childhood education professors have been focusing their attention on the student teaching experience, adding a fourth visit in the professional semester experience for all candidates. They continue to evaluate course syllabi in the major as well, seeking to evaluate and update the program where needed. Attention has been given to helping the continuing education office develop early childhood education director training. Finally, an early childhood education student club serves as a retention effort in the program.
- The staff ministry program, with the assistance of MLC Admissions, seeks ways to promote and inform potential candidates about the major. Program director Lawrence Olson continues to survey staff ministers and their congregations to gain a better understanding of the broader ministry needs these candidates might supply to our WELS constituency.
- The graduate programs' system of review served to help restructure this growing part of MLC's offerings. Once housed under one overseeing Graduate Faculty Council, divisions for our four programs have been created to help inform the Graduate Faculty Council in its less frequent oversight meetings. Each division (MS in Education, MS in Educational Administration, MS in Special Education, and MA in Theological Studies) holds more regular meetings to engage faculty in the more detailed work needed at each level. The study recommends each division craft unique goals for their work, seek a greater depth of data collection, and consider whether one full-time faculty member is enough to administrate growing programs/offerings.
- The MLC general education curriculum was under review this past year. Seven recommendations came of this thorough review: 1) restructure the current on-campus general education committee; 2) create a new position entitled director of general education; 3) rewrite general education purpose, goals, and outcomes; 4) re-evaluate and amend the current general education curriculum; 5) revise the current assessment plan in general education courses; 6) address any remaining classroom facility and technology issues that remain from previously conducted studies; and 7) create a separate template for review of this part of the MLC curriculum.

God's gifts to MLC: Graduate and continuing education

Continuing education

Continuing education is a broad category that includes people seeking professional development through MLC as part of certificate programs and degree programs or stand-alone courses, webinars, and micro-credentials. Participants are primarily teachers and staff ministers, although a few undergraduate students take these courses as well. Continuing education numbers remain steady and strong. Each year we serve more than 1,000 people. Everything is offered online or at a satellite location. No continuing education or graduate courses are taught on the MLC campus.

New Teacher Induction

Nearly 300 first- and second-year teachers are mentored by about 170 experienced teachers. This past year, New Teacher Induction focused on improving the number of touchpoints and the quality of instructional feedback through the use of an online tool called SIBME (Seeing Is Believing Me). This platform provides a private space for mentors and mentees to share resources, files, and text messages and provides an easy, secure way for new teachers to record their lessons and receive time-stamped, specific feedback on their instruction.

Teaching ministry certification

The increased demand for WELS teachers has resulted in a record number of about 410 teachers without ministry certification teaching in Lutheran schools. About 52 percent of these teachers are actively pursuing their ministry certification. Demand for online ministry coursework has increased from 53 in 2014–15 to 307 in 2022–23. MLC is constantly adjusting the number and variety of online offerings to meet people's needs.

Graduate programs

Martin Luther College offers four online master's degrees designed for WELS teachers and staff ministers. Currently, MLC has 141 graduate students pursuing the follow degrees:

- Master of Science in Education: 59
- Master of Science in Educational Administration: 57
- Master of Science in Special Education: 11
- Master of Arts in Theological Studies: 14

God's gifts to MLC: Staff and faculty personnel

Anniversary recognitions

2022–23

- Lawrence Olson, 40 years in ministry

2023–24

- Daniel Balge, 40 years in ministry
- Heath Dobberpuhl, 25 years in ministry
- Brian Dose, 40 years in ministry
- Craig Hirschmann, 40 years in ministry
- Matthew Pearson, 25 years in ministry

Faculty retirements/conclusions of service

2022–23

- Lawrence Czer, called home to heaven
- John Boeder, accepted a call to Ascension, Escondido, Calif.
- Douglas Lange, retirement
- Ronald Ohm, retirement
- Philip Schroeder, assigned to Christ Our Savior, Collinsville, Ill.
- Tingting Schwartz, resignation

2023–24

- Alyssa Heckendorf, completing one-year call
- Brian Hennig, accepted a call to Northwestern Publishing House
- Grace Hennig, retirement
- Robert Klindworth, retirement

Faculty additions

2022–23

- Jacob Behnken, professor of music, dean of chapel
- Melissa Berg, director of the early childhood learning center
- Isaiah Degner, professor of Spanish
- Heath Dobberpuhl, professor of science
- Rebecca Doering, professor of physical education, softball coach
- Kathryn Gut, professor of early childhood education
- Paul Huebner, football coach, athletics recruiter
- Adam Pavelchik, professor of education, director of field experiences
- Mya Peshon, early childhood learning center lead teacher
- Nathaniel Savage, dormitory supervisor, theology instructor
- Rachel Youngblom, professor of special education

2023–24

- Aaron Bush, dormitory supervisor, theology instructor
- Aaron Dolan, professor of theology
- Alyssa Heckendorf, admissions counselor
- Samuel Hunter, professor of physical education, strength and conditioning coach
- Martin LaGrow, professor of education, non-traditional education instructional designer
- Nichole LaGrow, professor of education, director of non-traditional education
- Hannah Scharf, admissions counselor
- Duane Vance, professor of education, student teaching supervisor

Calling activity in 2023–24 for 2024–25

- Susan Decker accepted the call to serve as professor of English
- JoElyn Krohn accepted the call to serve as professor of mathematics, financial wellness coordinator
- Janet Justice accepted the call to serve as an admissions counselor
- Professor of education and student teaching supervisor call remains unfilled at this time

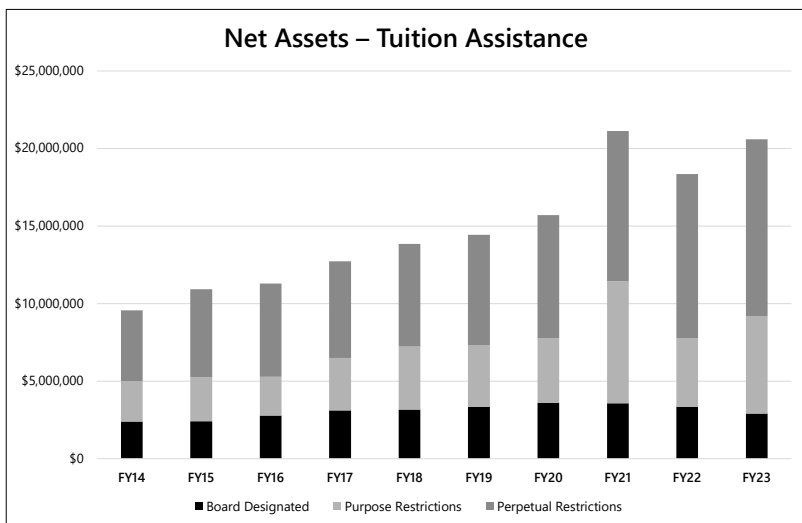
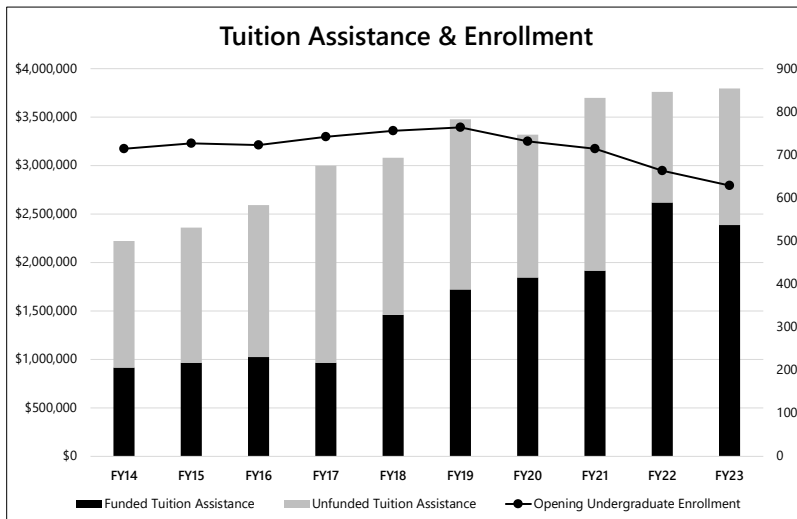
God's gifts to MLC: Financial

Like much of the higher education industry, MLC continues to navigate through uncertain times. Challenges include meeting students' evolving needs, providing secure and effective technology, employing a stable and qualified workforce, and managing a volatile economic climate with limited resources. While the industry outlook could be classified as bleak, MLC has many reasons for which to be thankful to God. At the same time, we cannot move forward without being fully aware of the hurdles we will face in the years to come. MLC is currently working with WELS and a third-party consultant to identify the underlying challenges facing the college and develop action plans to address MLC's underlying structural deficits and improve our overall financial health.

Financial aid—student cost and indebtedness
Student debt has long been a concern.

The college has implemented significant increases to student aid in an effort to reduce graduate debt. At the same time, the college has limited increases to tuition and room and board. MLC annually plans for a 10 percent budgetary increase to all tuition assistance including the Congregational Partner Grant Program.

The chart to the right shows MLC's continued commitment to tuition assistance as compared to opening undergraduate enrollment. Funded tuition assistance consists of scholarships and grants funded by federal programs in which MLC has discretion



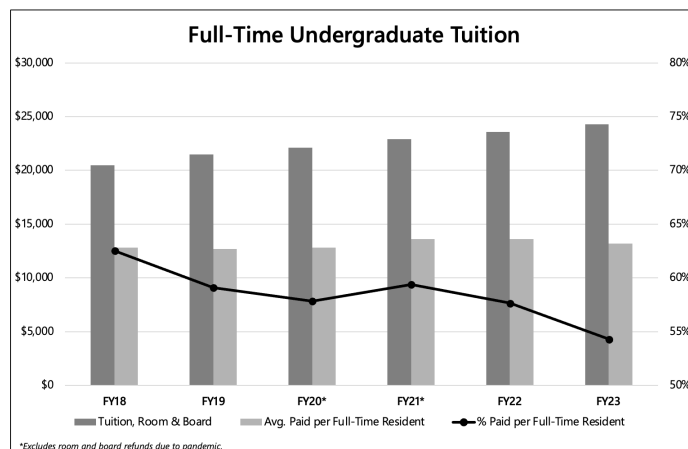
in determining recipients and amounts, as well as scholarships and grants from MLC's net assets without donor restrictions.

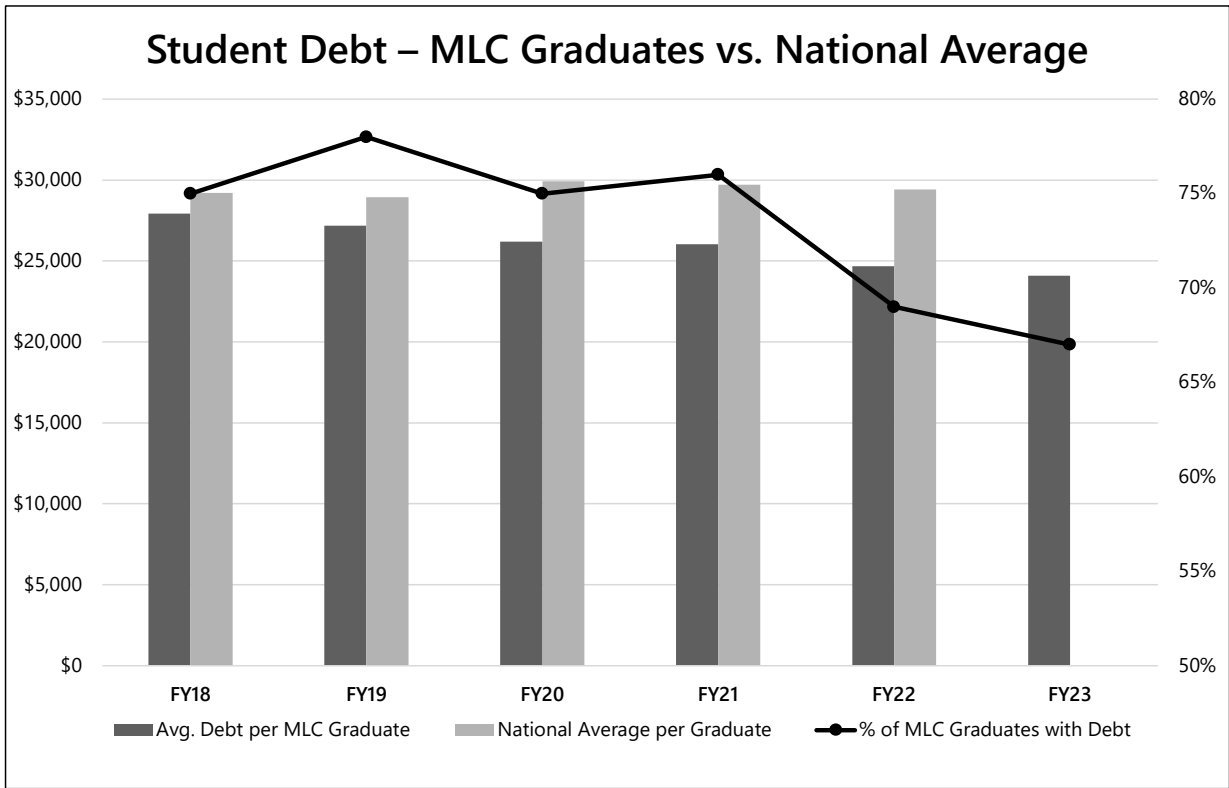
Net assets restricted for tuition assistance have also increased in recent years as shown in the chart to the left.

While we still have work to do, efforts to keep student costs down have been blessed. The chart below summarizes the average amount paid per full-time, resident student once all grant aid has been accounted for.

The chart at the top of the next page depicts the ongoing challenge in educational debt

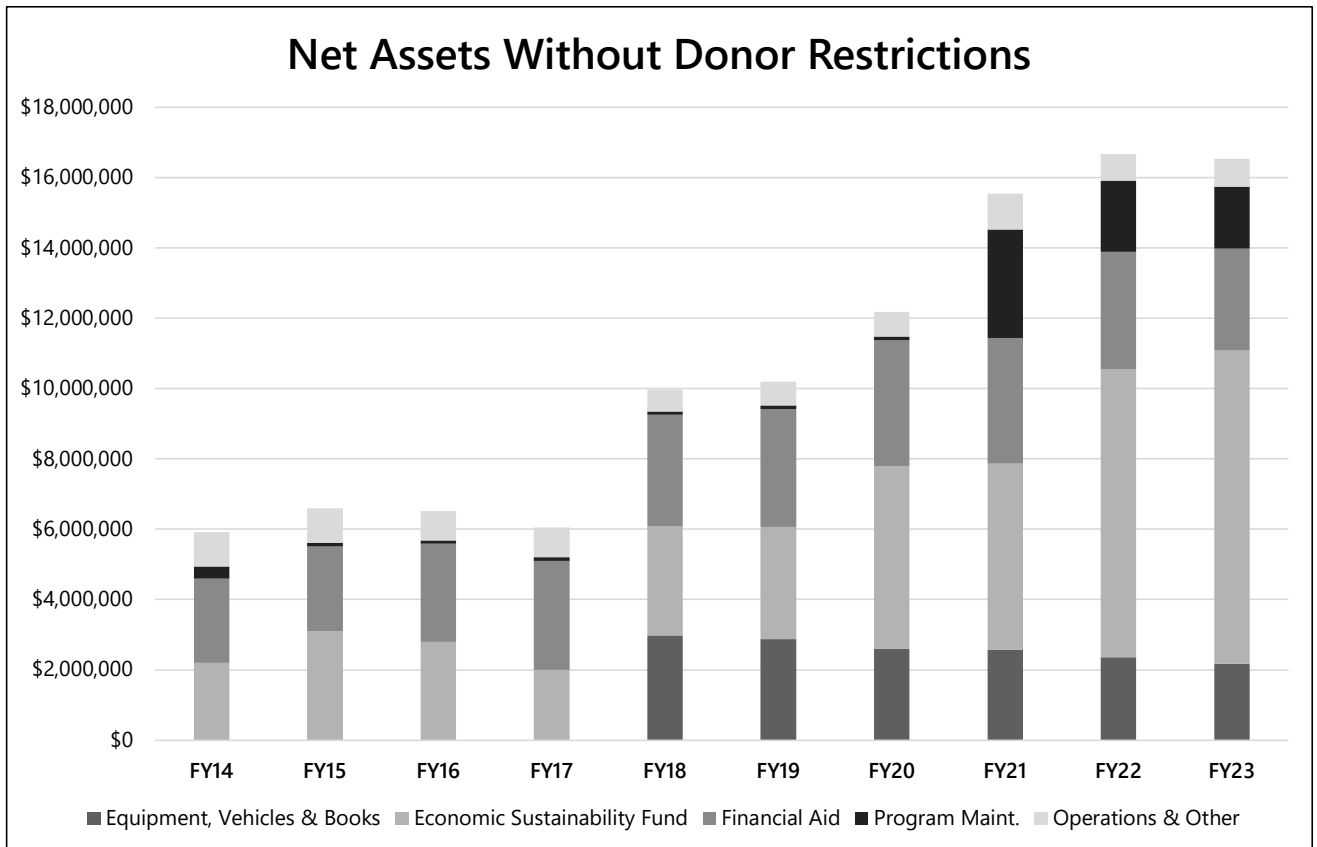
for college graduates both at MLC and elsewhere in our country. For the fifth straight year, MLC graduate debt has been lower than the year before, with a total reduction of about \$3,800 from the high in FY 2018. Most recently, MLC graduate debt is about \$4,700 below the national average graduate debt (as reported by *U.S. News & World Report*). We attribute these trends to a combination of increased donations for student assistance, growth in the Congregational Partner Grant Program, and the MLC financial literacy program. We pray for continued improvement in student debt and praise God for the success thus far.





Use of MLC net assets without donor restrictions

As of June 30, 2023, net assets without donor restrictions at MLC totaled \$16,544,690. A summary of unrestricted net assets from FY 2014 to FY 2023 is provided in the chart below.



Endowments have also grown significantly in recent years, due to a combination of donations and market gains. At the same time, distributions from endowments have grown to almost \$500,000 annually. Here is a summary of donor-restricted endowments over the last ten years.

MLC has begun planning for the FY 2026–27 biennium. The college faces the steep challenges of lower enrollment coupled with inflationary costs. We look for God’s hand to continue to guide us, helping to fulfill our mission of training men and women for public ministry to meet the needs of WELS. “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.”

God’s gifts to MLC: Campus buildings, improvements, and maintenance

Luther Student Union remodel
The renovation of the Luther Student Center Student Union began after last year’s graduation and was completed in July 2023. The new space was designed to

promote impromptu gatherings and conversations and to be an easy connection to the Cultural Engagement Center and Campus Store. The renovation created significantly more open floor space with new lighting, flooring, and game tables. A variety of moveable furniture allows students to study and socialize where they feel comfortable and allows customization of the space to suit ever-changing activities.

Chapel lower-level renovation

The Chapel of the Christ was built 12 years ago. Due to cost, the lower level was never completed as planned. This space was intended to be a designated area for rehearsals, recitals, and instruction. Recently, those original ideas were revisited, refined, and implemented into a new design. The plans include a rehearsal space for handbells, a guitar studio, a computer lab for composition and theory students, and storage for robes and instruments. The centerpiece is a large recital and rehearsal room. At present, the wind symphony has no dedicated space for rehearsals.

The renovation space is roughly 10,000 square feet and is estimated to cost approximately \$900,000 through two phases. Phase one of the project is construction and installation of the necessary infrastructure at an estimated cost of \$250,000. This includes HVAC mechanical work, architectural and electrical construction permitting documents (lighting, general power, connections, fire alarm, data technology wiring), and the framing of walls in the lower level (completed through in-house construction by MLC maintenance staff). Phase two will include the costs to complete the remainder of the buildout, including materials and labor costs for general construction, audio/visual technology costs, furniture, and equipment.

The MLC Governing Board and WELS Synodical Council approved moving forward with phase one of the project utilizing donor-designated gifts specific for the chapel basement renovation. Work started in March 2024.

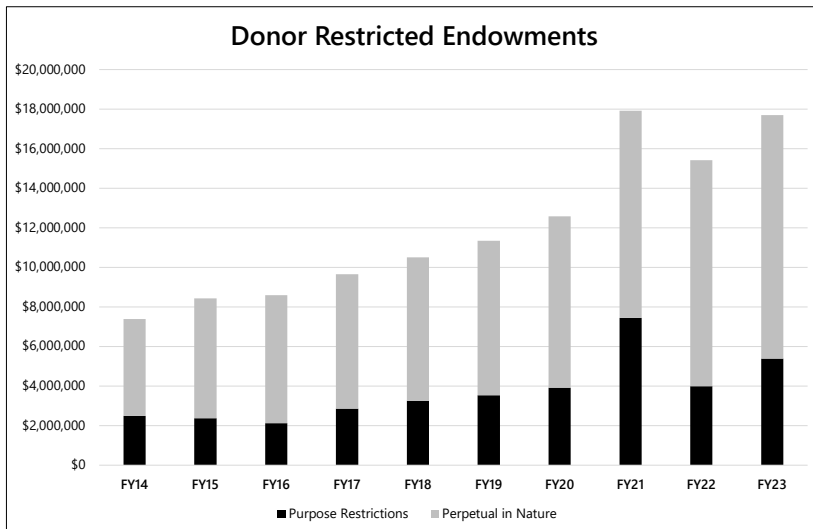
God’s gifts to MLC: Charitable gifts through the Mission Advancement office

The Office of Mission Advancement is responsible for overall fund development, public and community relations, alumni relations, events, and advancement efforts at MLC. As of Feb. 29, 2024, we have received more than \$3.6 million in charitable gifts from more than 2,000 donors toward our FY 2024 goal of \$4.4 million. In FY 2024 so far, we have conducted more than 100 face-to-face visits in 8 different states.

Catalysts for charitable support in FY 2024 have been scholarships, the competency-based education program, and the chapel lower-level renovation into a large music rehearsal/recital space. We offer our sincere thanks to everyone who has given so generously to support our students.

Scholarships—annual and endowed

Another significant factor in helping to ease the financial burden on students can be seen in the number of endowed and annual scholarships established at MLC. For the 2023–24 school year, more than 141 endowed and annual



funds provided vital financial aid for MLC students on their journey to full-time gospel ministry. Since the last district convention report in summer 2022, MLC supporters have established 30 new named scholarship funds.

Congregational Partner Grant Program

We strongly encourage congregations to support their MLC students through the Congregational Partner Grant Program. For the 2023–24 school year, MLC matched dollar for dollar (up to \$1,325) the gifts a congregation gathers to apply to the tuition of their MLC student(s). As a renewable effort, the Congregational Partner Grant Program can provide four or five years of financial aid support—up to \$13,250 to each student—in addition to the other financial aid the student receives. For the 2023–24 school year, 557 students from 284 congregations received congregational grants that were matched by MLC. This resulted in nearly \$1.5 million in financial aid to our students, a 39 percent increase in two years! Because of the success of this program and the need for increased financial aid, beginning in academic year 2024–25, the Congregational Partner Grant Program will match up to \$1,450 per year.

God's gifts to MLC: Admissions and student retention

The Admissions department at MLC continues to deploy varied methods to share the tremendous privilege of the called ministry with various groups of people. The Admissions team has been enhanced in the past year with the addition of graduates of MLC who now continue their studies at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. A partnership with Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary affords the ability for the Admissions team at MLC to have a part of their team home-based in southern Wisconsin within range of a large number of WELS ministries.

The Admissions staff has also placed a high value on the experience of high school visitors to our campus on Focus on Ministry trips. These trips bring between 700 to 1,000 students each year to the campus and provide a hands-on experience for each student. The Admissions staff has one counselor specifically designed to oversee and carry out the Focus on Ministry experience. This was a reallocation of the co-curricular counselor to shine a larger light on the importance of the on-campus visit. Instead of the co-curricular counselor, Admissions staff works closely with MLC coaches, who carry out the bulk of the recruitment for their programs. This provides the opportunity for coaches to share how athletics and preparation for the public ministry can work hand in hand in their particular sport.

This past year, the Admissions staff adopted a new theme as they carry out their work. The theme “Here Am I” from Isaiah 6:8 was chosen to directly highlight God’s Word as counselors encourage students for the public ministry.

By God’s grace, we pray that old and new methods of recruitment will encourage students in God’s Word to consider preparing for the public ministry.

God's gifts to MLC: Student support services

The “college experience” fosters growth and development intellectually, socially, vocationally, individually, and, at Martin Luther College, spiritually. The Student Life division seeks to enhance that experience for our students as they prepare to serve God’s people as pastors, teachers, and staff ministers of the gospel.

Since COVID-19 there has been an emphasis on providing a greater number and variety of on-campus activities for students to enjoy. The Student Senate has always sponsored activities and in recent years has made it easier for student groups to form special interest clubs through which the campus is offered a wider range of enjoyable activities. The staff in each dormitory has also made strides in sponsoring events and activities for their own residents. The goal is to make this work part of the dormitory staff culture and expectation. MLC’s events coordinator has a team of students that also works to coordinate a number of larger campus events specifically with the student body in mind. Enjoyment, service, and engagement with one another are important goals in all of these efforts—and this emphasis will continue.

MLC’s Cultural Engagement Center located in the Luther Student Union helps to onboard and assist international students; helps MLC students navigate a semester of studying abroad; and emphasizes cultural education for students, faculty, and staff. The Cultural Engagement Center is focused on helping the campus family to value the different and differing cultures in our country, to understand the varied experiences and history of people groups, and to rejoice in the part God gives us in his gracious plan to make the many one in Christ forever.

A look ahead

MLC’s new strategic plan

MLC developed and implemented a new strategic plan effective July 1, 2022. As we close this report with this “look ahead,” we will filter our comments through the lens of that strategic plan.

The theme of our strategic plan is *Pursuing Excellence Under the Cross*.

Here is a full statement of that theme, the three foundational beliefs that underlie it, and the four key initiatives that flow from it.

As family in Christ, MLC pursues excellence under the cross in equipping called workers for our synod and its mission fields around the world.

Three foundational beliefs:

- **God loves us.** We pursue excellence under CHRIST's cross as God's fully loved children who know our heavenly Father is already perfectly pleased with us in Christ.
- **God gifts us.** We pursue EXCELLENCE under the cross by giving God the best his grace inspires in us with the unique talents he's given each of us.
- **God emboldens us.** We pursue excellence under OUR OWN cross as we die to mediocrity and apathy and rise in Christ with the courage to take risks for the gospel.

Four key initiatives:

- **We embrace our family's identity:** We pursue excellence under the cross as we delight without apology in being a confessional Lutheran faith family whose defining mission is to equip and support the current and future generations of faithful pastors, educators, and staff ministers.
- **We empower our family's formation:** We pursue excellence under the cross as we encourage spiritual and intellectual growth for our entire family, support the physical and emotional health of each family member, and engage gracefully in difficult conversations to move our mission forward.
- **We expand our family's reach:** We pursue excellence under the cross as we strive to reflect the "every nation, tribe, people, and language" reality of God's people (Revelation 7:9) by working to become a more welcoming home for students of all ages and backgrounds who have gifts for ministry.
- **We endow our family's home:** We pursue excellence under the cross as we make MLC significantly more affordable without sacrificing an excellent college experience on a beautiful and well-equipped campus.

Below is a brief sampling of various ways MLC is seeking to pursue excellence in the years ahead:

Pursuing excellence under the cross in opening a new pathway to the teaching ministry for non-traditional students

Competency-based education at MLC

MLC's competency-based education program, newly titled the Alternative Pathway to Professional Licensure Eligibility (APPLE), is on track for the enrollment of non-traditional students seeking a degree and teacher licensure in elementary education in fall 2025. This program is designed to support returning adult learners who are eager to join the public ministry as Lutheran elementary school teachers, have completed some college courses, and may have a degree but not a baccalaureate degree in education. It has been built intentionally as a competency-based, online learning experience. As an outcomes-based approach, the program asks learners to demonstrate their proficiency in the same knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors as our traditional, on-campus elementary education program.

Approval has been received from the Minnesota Office of Higher Education. We must await approval from the Higher Learning Commission, our nationally recognized accreditors, before advertising or promoting the program in any way. Current faculty in our theology and elementary education divisions are working with leaders in this new program to help develop coursework and gain a clear understanding of the expectations of this new competency-based program.

Pursuing excellence under the cross in providing training for those already serving in our synod's early childhood ministries

Support for early childhood ministries

Based on consumer demand, MLC is expanding its professional development support for hired and called early childhood ministry staff. We are using a four-tiered approach to address the variety of needs. Learn more about this approach on p. 16 in the report of the Continuing Education for Called Workers Committee.

Pursuing excellence under the cross in continuing to invest in our campus facilities

Pond improvements

With the concern of the underground water table elevation in relation to the basement elevations of the adjacent

buildings (Summit Hall and the Chapel of the Christ), MLC is converting the stormwater pond into a filtration pond with a dry bottom. To do this and utilize the existing storm sewer outlet, the bottom of the pond was raised as needed to install drain tiles and sand/compost medium. In the short term, the filtration pond will be grass covered and mowable. In the long term, the Grounds department will investigate whether any landscape architecture could be added to create an aesthetic feature on our campus. The construction of the filtration pond began in spring with completion expected by early June 2024.

Renovations of MLC's residence halls

In February 2024, the MLC Governing Board recommended not moving forward with a brand-new residence hall and instead pivoting to focus on the improvements and renovations that could be made to the existing residence hall infrastructure. This decision also came with the recommendation to ask donors to redirect gifts originally given to build a new residence hall as part of pillar three of the "Equipping Christian Witnesses" capital campaign toward improvements and renovations to the existing MLC residence hall infrastructure.

Already this summer, the MLC Governing Board and WELS Synodical Council approved moving forward with a full renovation of the restrooms and showers in Centennial Hall (1950), the primary residence for freshman and sophomore women. The renovation will include doubling the square footage of the bathrooms and number of showers on each wing of the residence hall, including significant infrastructure replacements of piping, plumbing fixtures, exhaust fans, ductwork, and temperature controls. Work started in May 2024. Future updates for other residence halls are continuing to be developed.

Pursuing excellence under the cross in recruiting and retaining traditional-aged students

We will seek to pursue excellence in recruiting a growing student body that more and more reflects the gracious reality that Christ has purchased souls "from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Revelation 5:9). We pray for God's blessings on our Cultural Engagement Center with a full-time director, Megan Kassuelke, partnering with our cultural diversity coordinator, Aaron Robinson. Our whole campus will be partnering with this team to make MLC an even more inviting place for students of color as well as for international students. With an ever-growing mission field of almost eight billion people to reach across our country and around the world, it is our prayer that our own student body more and more reflects those whom we are seeking to reach.

A second key way we are working on the challenge of recruitment is through the continued efforts of our Admissions department. Our director of admissions and admissions counselors continue to work with the faculties and staff of our synodical prep schools and our area Lutheran high schools to equip and encourage them as our greatest ministerial encouragers with our high school students. Through increased training for our high school teachers who serve as on-campus liaisons, increased amounts and frequency of Focus on Ministry trips, increased presence at high schools by our counselors and MLC students, and the increased use of technology and social media with our recruits, we pray God can use these efforts to provide even more candidates for ministry. Our Admissions staff continues to put a high priority on reaching out more effectively to WELS students who are homeschooled or who attend public schools. We will continue to work with pastors and congregations in outlying areas to target candidates for public ministry who have not attended a WELS high school and have gifts for the public ministry. The Admissions department will also increase our presence at district meetings and events across the synod as much as possible. Please continue to pray that God will bless our efforts with many students eager to consider serving their Savior in our schools and congregations. Further, our MLC Admissions department will continue forging stronger partnerships with our entire MLC faculty to focus on retaining those already enrolled at MLC. While MLC has one of the highest retention rates in the country, we look to continually strengthen current retention efforts as well as explore new ideas that can help us hold on to even more students.

Finally, we urge our entire synod to keep encouraging the next generation to consider service in the public ministry. While being tempted to think this needs to be a sales pitch for MLC, instead we implore WELS members to encourage their congregation's children by regularly keeping their pastors, teachers, and staff ministers in their prayers. God tells us in his Word that the "prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective" and also commands us to "ask the Lord of the harvest to send workers into his harvest field." What a wonderful example for our children while also serving an eternal purpose! Encouragement can also happen by regularly holding our called workers within our congregations and throughout the synod in high esteem. Students at MLC regularly point to this as an encouragement to them as they grew up, both those with called worker parents and those who were first-generation called worker candidates. Students also point at the high importance of an influential called worker in their life who set an example for them in the public ministry and motivated them to attempt the ministry themselves.

Pursuing excellence under the cross in strengthening student support on campus

Renewed efforts are underway to increase the support and assistance MLC provides to non-traditional and second-career students. What efforts can be made to screen and prepare potential students who desire to enter a program of study at MLC? What can be done to make it easier to secure suitable housing for individuals and families? How can non-traditional students engage more easily with the larger campus family? Can the college help them integrate into the New Ulm community and our local WELS congregations? What can we do to foster friendship, fellowship, and support within this special student group itself? Is there need and are there ways to adjust academic programs, especially in consideration of the life experience many students bring with them? A committee of the college, comprised of faculty, students, and administrators, has met during the past year to take up these questions.

About 10 percent of the MLC student body receives the assistance of licensed Christian counselors contracted by the college. This reflects the fact that for 25 years the mental health needs of college students across the country have been on the rise, as has the expectation of available and accessible professional resources. Our college is grateful for the services of two confessional Lutheran counseling agencies—Christian Family Solutions and a local agency named Footnotes Counseling Service. We thank the Lord for the help he provides through these skilled professionals as well as through on-campus resources including the vice president for student life, the pastors who serve as tutors in the men’s dormitories, our women’s services director, professors, and the RA staff, which receives training to serve as peer mentors and resiliency educators. In the next year a group of motivated students hopes to begin a program offering mentoring to other interested students.

Closing

It is with thanks to God that this report has outlined the blessings God has provided our WELS college of ministry over the past two years. And it is with confidence in his grace that we make our plans for the years ahead, knowing that only what he chooses to bless will prosper. Through all of the challenges and opportunities before us, we remain thankful to God for the privilege our synod gives to us to raise up the next generation of pastors, teachers, and staff ministers to proclaim the gospel in our synod across our country and around the world. For the sake of the gospel ministry, and in answer to the prayers of our entire synod, may God bless these efforts far beyond anything we might even have anticipated!

Rev. Richard Gurgel, reporter

Rev. Michael Woldt, chairman
Teacher Joe Archer
Teacher Paul Kelm
Rev. Geoffrey Kieta
Mr. Thomas Klaut
Teacher Joel Lauber
Rev. Michael Lindemann
Mr. Timothy Luetzow
Rev. Peter Prange
Teacher David Uhlhorn
Mr. Michael Valleau
Teacher Andrew Van Weele

Advisory:

Rev. Richard Gurgel, Martin Luther College president
Rev. Dennis Klatt, Minnesota District president
Mr. Michael Krueger
Rev. Paul Prange, administrator of WELS Board for Ministerial Education
Rev. Mark Schroeder, WELS president
Mr. Thomas Walters

Michigan Lutheran Seminary

Our calling

Located in Saginaw, Mich., Michigan Lutheran Seminary (MLS) exists to prepare high school students for the public ministry of the gospel, encouraging them to enroll in the WELS college of ministry, Martin Luther College. Though originally a pastoral seminary for the Michigan Synod, MLS has been encouraging and equipping high school students for gospel ministry since 1910 through a liberal arts education that emphasizes biblical truths, language study, and the arts. The Lord has blessed that single mission with more than 5,000 graduates and more than 1,500 alumni who have entered the public ministry of the gospel in WELS. We thank the Lord that MLS alumni constitute just over 10 percent of current WLS students and just under 10 percent of current MLC students. In this era of growing vacancies and evident ripe harvest fields, MLS continues to strive to be a ministry preparatory school for WELS providing an excellent Christian education that encourages God's people to use their gifts in his service.

In order to fulfill its calling, MLS maintains a safe and well-equipped campus to educate its students. The 17-acre campus is owned and operated by WELS and administered through WELS Board for Ministerial Education and the MLS Governing Board. Fiscally sound financial practices aid in the educational experiences that produce high-quality candidates for ministry with the goal of fulfilling Scripture's commission to entrust the Scriptures to reliable people who are qualified to teach others (2 Timothy 2:2). WELS members support the ministry of MLS with their gifts to WELS and individual offerings to the school. The MLS Foundation, a separate 501(c)3, works collaboratively with MLS to provide additional funding for tuition assistance and capital improvements. In each of these sources of revenue, we are humbled at the overflowing generosity of God's people for the ministry of the Lord.

MLS relies on three sources of funding to carry out our mission: 1) synodical support, 2) tuition and room and board revenue, and 3) generous gifts from God's people who love their Lord and desire to support worker training in WELS. In the absence of state-sponsored school choice programs, MLS is increasingly dependent on the generosity of God's people to close the gap in meeting the tuition assistance needs of today's families. However, because of the generous support of WELS members, MLS has made a commitment that no student will be turned away from an MLS education purely for financial reasons. We are thankful that we have been able to make that commitment and ask the Lord to bless that effort through his people.

Our current situation

Enrollment

A 2023–24 opening enrollment of 192 is an increase from the past biennium in spite of a declining student pool in the Michigan District. Those 192 students represent six states and four WELS districts. Approximately 60 percent of those students live in the dormitory and 40 percent commute to MLS daily. Eighty percent of MLS students come from non-called-worker families, providing a fresh stream of first-generation ministry families to supplement the legacy families. Eighteen percent of those students have non- or mixed-Caucasian ethnic backgrounds, reflecting our country's increasingly diverse racial population.

MLS has 12 international students originating from three foreign countries: China, Korea, and Grenada. In keeping with our Savior's Great Commission, MLS was blessed to celebrate the confirmation of one Asian student into our WELS fellowship this year. International MLS students continue to enroll at MLC at a higher rate than any other WELS high school, potentially expanding the global reach of WELS' ministry.

An ambitious travel schedule by our interim admissions counselor demonstrates the goal to reach even more WELS students from outside of the Michigan District. Families that come from a farther distance are afforded travel allowances to assist with the extra financial burden of travel as children attend school states away from their home.

Ministry recruitment

With proper gospel motivation, recruitment for ministry is the underlying current to everything that we do at MLS. All students are given an age-appropriate ministry experience every year on campus to allow them to make an informed decision about using their gifts as a pastor, teacher, or staff minister. Freshmen have the opportunity to hear ministry

joys and opportunities from experienced called workers on Freshman Ministry Day. Second-year students participate in Sophomore Night as MLC and WLS recruiters provide information about their campuses and share ministry experiences. MLS juniors take a four-day tour of our three other WELS ministerial education campuses to allow them to see themselves as students in our higher ministerial education schools. Seniors have a Taste of Ministry opportunity as they shadow an experienced pastor, teacher, or staff minister to get a peek behind the curtain of gospel ministry.

Of special note this biennium has been the emphasis on mission ministry experience. In a partnership with WELS Board for Home Missions and the 100 Missions in 10 Years initiative, for the second year MLS placed all senior boys who desired a pastor track Taste of Ministry experience in a WELS home mission setting so that they could experience life as a mission pastor. This year's MLS senior boys will be, God willing, graduating from WLS in year 9 of the 10-year initiative. We pray that the Lord blesses those efforts.

Annually, approximately 25 percent of students participate in Project Titus trips, which place them in ministry settings that provide an excellent experience much different from their home congregations. One small-school advantage is that the majority of those students will participate in two (or more) Project Titus trips during their four years at MLS.

All students participate in our annual Mission Seminar when a WELS home or world missionary shares ministry encouragement with the entire student body. Upperclassmen meet with MLC Admissions counselors at least four times in their final two years on campus, many of them more than that. Twice daily chapel services often have ministry recruitment messages as devotion leaders speak about the need for and the enjoyment of service in the harvest fields.

Exit interviews with the current senior class indicate that approximately 95 percent of them recall being personally encouraged for ministry, and the same 95 percent expressed that the encouragement for ministry was genuine and evangelical. While we fully believe that it is the Spirit's prerogative to motivate hearts to serve in the public ministry, it is our absolute joy to encourage our students to consider that service as a calling in life.

Anniversary celebration

On April 28, 2024, the MLS campus celebrated the 50th anniversary of the teaching ministry of Steven Thiesfeldt with a special service of thanksgiving in the MLS chapel. Thiesfeldt has been a faithful servant administering God's grace in its various forms throughout his ministry. Of special note is the impact he has had on WELS ministerial education having served in four ministerial education schools: the former Martin Luther Preparatory School in Prairie du Chien, Wis.; Luther Preparatory School in Watertown, Wis.; Martin Luther College in New Ulm, Minn.; and finally at MLS for the past two years in a part-time capacity.

A look ahead

Strategic plan

In the summer of 2023, the MLS campus approved a three-year strategic plan entitled "Chosen People, Special Purpose." The theme is derived from St. Peter's first letter where the inspired apostle clearly defines all Christians' status before God as chosen people, and then clearly gives the purpose of that status, to declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light. The following vision was adopted: "Michigan Lutheran Seminary cultivates a culture of ministry encouragement to educate and equip students with the gospel, empowering them to live as God's chosen people and to declare his praises." In order to carry out that vision under God's blessing, five key goals were established:

1. Maximize the efficient use of human resources through a careful and thoughtful review of our administrative structure.
2. Develop a master site plan that maximizes use of current space, allows for future enhancements, and provides the facilities necessary for effectively educating a high school student in the 21st century.
3. Improve internal and external communication by coordinating existing resources and utilizing available technology tools.
4. Refine campus goals for excellence in academic and extracurricular offerings.
5. Enhance current admissions efforts for matriculation of incoming students, retention of current students, and encouragement to continue preparation for the public ministry of the gospel beyond MLS.

Tuition assistance

In response to the growing costs associated with a preparatory high school education, efforts have been made to increase tuition assistance to MLS families. In the 2022–23 school year, total tuition assistance of \$404,793 was provided to almost 100 families in the form of financial aid, grants, and scholarships, resulting in an average award

of over \$4,200 per recipient. That represents a 13 percent increase over the previous year, allowing MLS to continue to meet the needs of families who desire to provide their children a Christian education and fulfilling our promise to never let finances be the reason that prevents enrollment.

Encouragement grants to incoming freshman students who are nominated by their home pastor or teacher provide additional tuition assistance to students who excel in music or leadership or have noticeable gifts for ministry already at a young age. Dozens of endowed scholarships managed by MLS and the MLS Foundation remain a consistent source of assistance for students while at MLS and as they matriculate to MLC.

Thanks to generous supporters of MLS, plans are being made to increase tuition assistance again in the 2024–25 school year.

Campus security

MLS is blessed with a secure campus that has had no incidents of outside violence or theft for decades. Yet, with the increased awareness of threats against schools over the years, MLS applied for and received several security grants from the Michigan Department of Education to increase the security of our campus. A security assessment was conducted and consultants provided expert opinions about opportunities to improve campus security. Critical incident and digital mapping was completed in 2023, which provides MLS with site-specific mapping to assist personnel in cases of emergency. Plans are in place to replace and provide additional security cameras at entrance points and internal thoroughfares in the summer of 2024. Most importantly, the Lord continues to send his angels to watch over our faculty and students.

Capital projects

MLS is blessed with a well-maintained campus that is adequate for our current student body with room for expansion. In the next biennium, efforts will be made to modernize certain areas of campus. The Inter-Dorm Office will see a complete renovation in the summer of 2024. The gym floor will be sanded and repainted to address aging issues. Plans are being made to renovate the MLS Commons, the main gathering space for MLS students, into a more welcoming and flexible space for current students and future alumni gatherings and events.

A request

Our WELS preparatory high schools annually remain the most consistent source of candidates for the public ministry of the gospel. In our current climate of concerns about pastor and teacher shortages especially in view of blossoming ministry opportunities, supporting these ministries is worthy of personal and prayerful consideration. It is somewhat rare that a high school student knows absolutely that they want to enter the ministry. If you notice a student that has gifts for ministry, please encourage them to consider serving. Encourage them to enroll in one of our prep schools and then continue to support and pray for them if they do. We know that the Lord will answer the prayers of his people as they “ask the Lord of the harvest . . . to send out workers into his harvest field” (Matthew 9:38).

Please visit mlsem.org for more information about your WELS preparatory high school in Saginaw, Mich.

Rev. Mark Luetzow, reporter

Rev. Andrew Retberg, chairman
Rev. Adam Bode, vice chairman, Northern Wisconsin District
Rev. Craig Engel, Minnesota District
Mr. Mark Eubank, Michigan District
Teacher Josh Glowicki, Nebraska District
Mr. Kevin Keller, Southeastern Wisconsin District
Teacher John Melso, Western Wisconsin District
Rev. Andrew Schroeder, Arizona-California District

Advisory:

Rev. Mark Luetzow, Michigan Lutheran Seminary president
Rev. Paul Prange, administrator of WELS Board for Ministerial Education
Rev. Duane Rodewald, chairman of WELS Board for Ministerial Education
Rev. Mark Schroeder, WELS president
Rev. Snowden Sims, Michigan District president

Luther Preparatory School

Our calling

Luther Preparatory School (LPS), Watertown, Wis., has a single mission given to it by the synod when the prep department was first established on the Watertown campus in 1865: To encourage and prepare high school students for service in the public ministry of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. That mission is central to everything we do—in the classroom, in co-curricular activities, in our worship services, and in the personal guidance given to every student.

LPS is owned and operated by WELS. The synod has given LPS the privilege and responsibility to carry out this important work. The LPS Governing Board, faculty, and staff are grateful to our church body, which supports the work of LPS with its prayers, gifts, and gospel-laced encouraging words.

Our gracious God though his life-giving Word continues to bless Luther Prep in fulfilling its purpose. Year after year after year 45 percent, 55 percent, 65 percent . . . and a couple of times 70 percent of Prep's graduates enroll at Martin Luther College to continue their preparations . . . to become pastors, teachers, or staff ministers.

Luther Prep depends on three sources of funding to carry out its calling: 1) synod support; 2) payments for tuition and room and board; and 3) special gifts from congregations, groups, and individuals. We are grateful for the gospel's work of prompting such generosity and thankful hearts in God's people.

Our current situation

Enrollment

Enrollment has remained fairly stable over the past 12 years. LPS opened school year 2023–24 with an enrollment of 409. Our students come from 24 states, 4 foreign countries, 173 congregations, and all 12 WELS districts. More than two-thirds of our students come from lay families. Eighty-eight percent of LPS students reside in the dormitories. Thirteen percent are minorities.

Recruitment to LPS, with an eye on future full-time gospel ministry, remains a top priority. We invite and welcome all WELS upper grade students to visit our campus, “shadow” a Prep student, and spend a night in one of the dormitories to get a feel for Prep life. We host annual recruitment events such as WELS area and national co-ed basketball tournaments, Phoenix for a Day, the fall play, children's theater, and the musical, as well as numerous summer athletic camps. Each year these events bring 4,500 WELS grade school students from across the country to our campus.

Because so many of God's people throughout WELS support Luther Prep's financial aid, we want all parents to know that Prep will do whatever it can to keep financial concerns from becoming a major obstacle in enrolling their children. The Lord has blessed Luther Prep in being able to significantly increase its financial aid assistance, while averaging a less than 3 percent annual increase in tuition costs over the past 16 years.

Preparing for the mission

The Word is central in all we do. Chapel services—the heartbeat of Prep's daily living—are held twice daily. All classes are taught from a scriptural perspective, and students are encouraged in their personal devotional lives. The Holy Spirit works through the means of grace to encourage and prepare our young people for lives of gospel ministry and service.

The LPS curriculum is designed to prepare students to meet or exceed the requirements of MLC. LPS recognizes the need and desire for future musicians in our Lutheran congregations and classrooms. More than 95 percent of our students take piano lessons. The LPS organ program produces the most organ students for MLC. All students participate in chorus their first year, with more than 90 percent continuing thereafter. One in three Prep students are involved in the concert band, jazz band, brass choir, handbell choir, and string and guitar ensembles. Our select Prep Singer group sings at worship services in area congregations throughout the year and tours outside of Wisconsin every year during our spring break. All students take at least one year of Latin and three consecutive years of a foreign language in order to thoroughly prepare them for future language studies, especially those in the biblical languages.

Luther Prep has 13 varsity athletic teams with most of them having lower level(s), 3 drama/music productions per year, 10 choir/instrument groups, as well as various clubs, intramurals, etc.

Because our purpose is to prepare future pastors, teachers, and staff ministers, LPS offers age-appropriate ministry experiences to its students. All of our seniors take part in our Taste of Ministry program, in which prospective pastor students spend a weekend with area WELS pastors, and our prospective teacher students spend two days in a classroom with area elementary school teachers. Project Timothy is a program designed to provide mission, ministry, and cross-cultural experiences to LPS students. Sixty-eight students will assist with outreach and education programs of mission congregations in Arizona, Florida, Virginia, Georgia, Texas, Alaska, New Mexico, North Carolina, Germany, St. Lucia, Puerto Rico, and the Czech Republic. Also, senior boys are given the opportunity to prepare and speak an evening devotion to the student body. It is a common practice for their classmates to speak words of encouragement to these young men after the devotion is given.

Each year the entire junior class visits Martin Luther College. By the time our students graduate, each one will have met at least four times with an MLC recruiter. An array of missionaries, professors, teachers, pastors, and MLC and WLS students present topical ministry workshops at our annual Ministry Day. The entire student body takes part in Ministry Day. Sophomores also take an annual trip to the seminary, and seniors in the LPS pastor track visit the seminary each fall for worship, class visitation, and a tour. For seniors who are unsure about their future, Prep offers a “second look” trip to MLC. All of these efforts foster a ministry-minded student body.

The State of Wisconsin offers three parental choice programs for Wisconsin residents: Milwaukee, Racine, and Wisconsin Parental Choice Programs. In these programs, parents who fall under a designated family-size-based income threshold receive a voucher from the State of Wisconsin that pays the tuition costs of education for their children at participating private and religious schools.

The governing board approved Prep’s entry into these programs in 2017. Each year the governing board reviews these programs to ensure that they are consistent with the mission of LPS. Approximately 150 students participate in these programs, which have proven to be financially beneficial to our parents who are offering their sons and daughters for ministry. They have also afforded LPS the opportunity to award additional financial aid to many other families who are not able to participate in the programs. Prep’s student body consists entirely of WELS students.

Since the last district convention, Luther Prep has hired Nicole Bessert as our director of mission advancement.

John Boggs was asked by the governing board to take on and develop a director of ministry relations role. This position is meant to build a stronger connection between LPS and WELS families, as he will work more closely with congregations, schools, called workers, and Prep supporters with a ministry recruitment emphasis.

David Dodge will take on the role of Prep’s academic dean this coming school year.

After 49 years of service in ministry, 27 of those years at LPS, faithful and dedicated gospel servant Carl Hochmuth is retiring at the end of June.

Capital projects/improvements

LPS strives to maintain and keep in good repair the synod’s beautiful 35-acre campus and buildings. Major projects the past two years have been installing new windows throughout both 50-plus-year-old boys dormitories, HVAC updates, refinishing the gymnasium floor, and updating the furnishings in the student union and cafeteria.

A look ahead

Music is an integral component of our heritage, the Church, and Lutheran worship. The Lord has blessed LPS with an excellent music program and numerous musically gifted students, all preparing for service in the Church. The LPS music auditorium, built during the President William Taft administration, is 112 years old. The Luther Prep Governing Board has addressed the possible construction of a new music center for almost a decade.

At the direction of WELS Synodical Council, Luther Prep engaged in a financial feasibility study last year. The study indicated that Luther Prep could expect to gather between \$10 million and \$12 million for a project of this magnitude. Luther Prep’s Music Center Committee has been richly blessed in its partnership with WELS Ministry of Christian Giving and WELS Chief Financial Officer Kyle Egan as we work together to get this proposed project moving forward. As of this writing, architectural company Tredo Group has been working with synod leadership and LPS in providing a design that will meet the needs of Luther Prep and remain within the cost range.

More information should be available this fall. The music center would include a performing arts theater with seating for 600, designated choir and band rooms, piano/organ studios, practice rooms, a climate control system, and more.

When a new music center is built, the present 1912 auditorium would be repurposed to its original use and serve as a secondary gymnasium to accommodate our freshmen teams, wrestling team, dance team, and a plethora of intramural teams, as well as function in several other capacities.

LPS welcomes all WELS/Evangelical Lutheran Synod students to apply for enrollment with a recommendation from their pastor and, if applicable, teacher. We know that very few eighth-grade students have a definite plan for their lives after college. They will be encouraged and prepared for full-time ministry in their years at Prep. Should they choose a different direction after graduating, we know that they will be firmly grounded in faith and will serve the Lord Jesus and his Church in some other vocation.

Prep is grateful for all of its students. Parent after parent after parent has expressed that the LPS experience has brought them closer to their children for life. While all parents make some sacrifices, it is always our intent to offer ample financial aid. If the awarded aid is insufficient, LPS administration welcomes conversations with parents to bridge the gap.

Jesus said, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field" (Luke 10:2). The saints have been praying that prayer for the past two millennia. With the large number of vacancies in WELS pastoral and teaching ministries, and with our desire to establish even more home and world missions, the Lord's invitation to prayer becomes even more compelling. We pray fervently that the Lord will move the hearts of parents to offer their sons and daughters for gospel ministry and that young people will consider the high calling of gospel ministry.

Much more information can be found at lps.wels.net or by calling LPS at 920-261-4352.

Rev. Matthew Crass, reporter

Rev. Timothy Spaude, chairman
Rev. Daniel Schmidt, vice chairman
Mr. Stephen Balza, secretary
Teacher Seth Fitzsimmons
Teacher Peter Gumm
Rev. Jesse Johnston
Mr. Jack May
Rev. Thomas Moldenhauer

Advisory:

Rev. Matthew Crass, Luther Preparatory School president
Rev. Michael Jensen, Western Wisconsin District president
Rev. Paul Prange, administrator of WELS Board for Ministerial Education
Rev. Duane Rodewald, chairman of WELS Board for Ministerial Education
Rev. Mark Schroeder, WELS president

Subsidiaries and Benefit Plans

A number of subsidiary groups and one affiliate (WELS Benefit Plans) serve the synod. These entities do not receive support from the synod's operating budget. Each is governed by a board that is accountable to the synod via the Synodical Council.

WELS Historical Institute

Our calling

WELS Historical Institute is thankful for the privilege and opportunity to serve WELS in preserving, researching, and promoting the study of our synod's history. History, in general, is vitally important. Our salvation is founded on real historical events. The continuing study of church history is the study of God's work in the world, through his church and through the proclamation of his Word by his church, to gather his believers into his church. As we study WELS history, we grow in our gratitude for God's work through and for our beloved synod. We marvel at his grace as our synod has struggled under the cross and been blessed by his Spirit.

Our current situation

WELS Historical Institute endeavors to carry out its purposes for WELS in a variety of ways. The work of Susan Willems, the WELS archivist, preserves WELS history and provides an avenue for research (see the report of WELS Archives on p. 45). Fruits of historical research are published in the *WELS Historical Institute Journal* and communicated in presentations about events, people, congregations, schools, and developments in WELS history. Many of these presentations are livestreamed, recorded, and archived on the WELS Historical Institute website at welshistoricalinstitute.org. The first two presentations in WELS Historical Institute's "Our Great Heritage" series on the history of the WELS ministerial education schools have been completed. Paul Prange spoke on the history of Michigan Lutheran Seminary and John Brenner gave a presentation on the history of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. In addition, a presentation by James Huebner on the history of Grace Lutheran Church in Milwaukee, Wis., one of the founding congregations of the Wisconsin Synod, is also available on the website.

WELS Historical Institute also endeavors to preserve and present the synod's history through the ongoing restoration and maintenance work on the WELS Museum and Salem Landmark Church, which is often the site of presentations and events. For the past few years, a hymn sing has been held in the Landmark Church. December 2023 saw a new event: a German Christmas song service. One of Salem's pastors, Paul Meier, organized the event. It was attended by about one hundred people. Throughout the year, different groups stop by the museum and church for a tour. William Schaefer oversees much of the ongoing restoration and maintenance work and the tours. Thanks to a grant from the synod, the flat roof on the education wing of the Landmark Church was replaced in 2023. WELS Historical Institute is grateful to the synod's support of these larger maintenance projects.

A look ahead

WELS Historical Institute continues to look for ways to increase membership in the institute and interest in WELS history. WELS Historical Institute and WELS Archives regularly have a presence at such events as the WELS synod convention, WELS National Conference on Lutheran Leadership, Lutheran Women's Missionary Society National Convention, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary's Mission and Ministry, the WELS Women's Ministry Conference, and the WELS National Conference on Worship, Music, and the Arts. Personal recruitment, social media, additions to the website, and synodwide communications promoting the work of WELS Historical Institute and encouragement to consider joining are also ongoing initiatives. Anyone interested in joining WELS Historical Institute can do so at welshistoricalinstitute.org/membership. Annual membership for individuals is \$40 with discounts for

multiple years. Members receive a subscription to the *WELS Historical Institute Journal*, newsletters promoting presentations and other information about the institute's work, and discounts on bus tours.

Numerous presentations are planned for the upcoming biennium. A virtual tour of the WELS Archives by Joel Otto and Susan Willems is planned as a livestreamed event and should be on the WELS Historical Institute website by early summer. Mark Jeske is slated to give the second part of his presentation on the history of Wisconsin Synod congregations in Milwaukee. The series of lectures on WELS ministerial education schools will continue with a presentation on the history of Luther Preparatory School and its predecessor schools by Mark Schroeder in fall 2024. The schedule of these events can be found on the WELS Historical Institute website.

The institute will continue its work of improving the WELS Museum and refurbishing Salem Landmark Church as time and funds allow. Work on the steeple, windows, and flooring is on the agenda for the next several years.

The 175th anniversary of the founding of the Wisconsin Synod will occur in 2025. WELS Historical Institute looks forward to the opportunity the anniversary will afford to encourage the study, research, and telling of the history of the gospel's advance in congregations, institutions, and the synod. Several authors are lined up to write articles about influential people and events in our synod's history for *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* and the *WELS Historical Institute Journal*.

Because WELS Historical Institute is not part of the synod's budget, it relies on support for its work from membership fees and gifts. Any member of WELS may join the WELS Historical Institute. Gifts may be given through the WELS Historical Institute's website. The history of Christ's church and our synod continues as we carry out our various callings in response to Christ's love for us.

Prof. Joel Otto, reporter

Prof. Joel Otto, chairman

Mr. Daniel Nommensen, vice chairman

Rev. William Schaefer, secretary

Mr. Ryan Haines, treasurer

Rev. Justin Dauck

Mr. Kyle Egan, *ex officio*

Mr. Steve Miller

Mr. Carl Nolte

Rev. Peter Prange

Ms. Mary Rindfleisch

Rev. Benjamin Schaefer

Rev. Paul Schleis

Rev. Robert Weiss

Advisory:

Prof. em John Brenner, editor, *WELS Historical Institute Journal*

Mrs. Susan Willems, WELS archivist

WELS Church Extension Fund, Inc.

Our calling

WELS Church Extension Fund, Inc. (CEF), is a self-supporting, not-for-profit, wholly-owned subsidiary corporation of WELS. Its primary purpose is to provide loans and grants for mission congregations whose parsonage, land, and facility projects are under the direction of WELS Board for Home Missions and loans to mission-minded self-supporting congregations for facility expansion and renovation as tools for gospel outreach.

Our current situation

CEF is financially strong as it maintains a stable and conservative balance sheet with a healthy capital-to-asset ratio of approximately 40 percent. Funding to conduct our calling comes primarily from three sources: member investments, operating revenue, and gifts and bequests. Individual members, congregations, and affiliates of WELS may invest in CEF certificates and savings accounts. As of March 2024, more than 2,700 investors have entrusted CEF with approximately \$105 million. WELS member investments in CEF provide the principal funding for the loan program and net revenues from operations, investments, and gifts and bequests made to CEF provide funding for the congregational grant program and special grants to Home Missions. CEF strives to maintain an affordable lending rate structure for borrowers. However, the combination of quick and sharp rate hikes from the Federal Reserve caused by persistent inflation, an increased demand for lending within WELS congregations, and pressure on the investment portfolio due to the competitive nature of the interest rate environment has forced an increase in our cost of funds and, in turn, overall lending rates. As the investment portfolio grows to meet the demand for lending and the Federal Reserve looks to potentially start to reduce rates, we'll be able to start to rebalance the overall interest rate structure.

Loan program

The CEF loan portfolio has grown to 202 loans as of March 2024, with dollars outstanding of \$197 million, which is a 13.6 percent increase in our loan portfolio dollars outstanding from 12 months ago. Currently we have 22 congregations in the construction process with \$39 million outstanding to complete those projects inclusive of \$1.5 million of grant dollars. New loan applications for fiscal year 2024 trail prior years in the number of applicants and project sizes.

Grant program

CEF provides matching grants to eligible mission congregations after they have provided a minimum 10 percent down payment for their initial land purchases, existing facility purchase, or new facility construction projects. A congregation's down payment dollars combined with a CEF matching grant allows the mission congregation to move forward with a more manageable loan payment. CEF has provided matching grants to mission congregations of \$0.3 million, \$2.7 million, and \$1.0 million during the fiscal years ended June 30, 2023, 2022, and 2021, respectively. In addition, matching grants of \$2.2 million have been approved through February 2024.

Special grants to Home Missions

In addition to the matching grant program to borrowing mission status congregations, CEF provides special grants to WELS Board for Home Missions for assisting mission congregations with operations, land, and facility projects. These grants have totaled \$2.1 million, \$1.6 million, and \$1.7 million during the fiscal years ended June 30, 2023, 2022, and 2021, respectively. In addition, special grants of \$1.2 million have been distributed through February 2024.

A look ahead

We pray by God's grace that WELS CEF will continue to benefit from positive operational results, ensuring the safety and soundness required of financial institutions, and be able to continue to provide loans and grants over and above its present lending operations and matching, endowment, and unrestricted net asset grant programs to assist more congregations and Home Missions.

We anticipate that the loan portfolio will increase during the remaining months of 2024 and continue to increase in the first half of fiscal year 2025 to more than \$210 million based on annual repayment of loans and existing approved commitments to lend. We are hopeful that Home Missions' "100 in 10" church-planting initiative will help continue to build the loan portfolio and provide CEF with lending opportunities into the new fiscal year and beyond. Maintaining a healthy and disciplined approach regarding operations and a fair and competitive interest rate environment for investors and borrowers is critical for CEF's financial health.

We continue to encourage individual WELS members, congregations, and affiliated organizations to consider investing in CEF loan, savings, and retirement/IRA certificates and to consider gifts and bequests to CEF to help support our calling and partnership with Home Missions.

Contact WELS CEF at 1-866-511-7793 or cef@wels.net. Visit our website at wels.net/cef.

Mr. Scott Page, reporter

Mr. Seth Hansen, chairman

Mr. Timothy Boerneke, vice chairman

Mr. Ron Kerr, secretary
Mr. James Bodendorfer
Mr. Kyle Egan, *ex officio*, WELS chief financial officer and treasurer
Rev. Timothy Gauger
Mr. Timothy Gensmer
Mr. Mark Hartman
Mr. David Hiron
Mr. Joel Kock

Advisory:

Rev. Mark Gabb, administrator of WELS Board for Home Missions
Mr. Sean Young, senior director of WELS Missions Operations

WELS Foundation, Inc.

Our calling

Established in 1965, WELS Foundation, Inc., serves the Synodical Council by organizing exclusively to provide, direct, channel, and manage funds for religious, charitable, and educational purposes consistent with the principles of the synod.

Our current situation

WELS Foundation exists to help God's people support gospel ministry through WELS. It provides planned giving services and administrative support for gifts benefiting WELS congregations and ministries. WELS Foundation strives to be the foundation of choice for members, entities, and affiliates of WELS. Over the last three fiscal years (FY21 to FY23), WELS Foundation has been privileged to distribute \$49.2 million in donor-directed gifts to various WELS ministries.

WELS Foundation provides various planned giving opportunities, including charitable gift annuities, charitable remainder trusts, donor-advised funds, and endowment funds. It currently administers nearly 1,300 charitable gifts on behalf of WELS members for the benefit of WELS ministries.

As of Dec. 31, 2023, the total assets were \$188.0 million with net assets of \$71.4 million. The net assets held by WELS Foundation are managed for the benefit of WELS ministries as designated by the donor. These ministries include WELS Missions and Ministerial Education schools (Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Martin Luther College, Luther Preparatory School, and Michigan Lutheran Seminary), congregations, and numerous affiliated ministries such as area Lutheran high schools. Assets held with a long-term time horizon are invested through WELS Investment Funds.

Endowment funds

Endowment funds are permanently restricted funds established to receive and administer all gifts that are designated by the donor(s) for an endowment from sources such as cash, stocks, bonds, mutual funds, bequests, life insurance, charitable gift annuities, insurance policies, trusts, real estate, personal property, or any other gift, whether current or deferred.

Lord willing, expenditures from endowments further the work of the church by providing ongoing financial support for ministry until the Lord returns.

Donor-designated endowments can be established through WELS Foundation for the benefit of WELS congregations, area Lutheran high schools, or other WELS-affiliated ministries. WELS Foundation also administers synodical endowment funds for WELS, WELS Home and World Missions, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Martin Luther College, Luther Preparatory School, and Michigan Lutheran Seminary.

As of Dec. 31, 2023, WELS Foundation administered 417 endowment funds with a total market value of \$125.6 million.

Charitable gift annuities

A charitable gift annuity is a contract between a WELS member and WELS Foundation, by which the member makes a gift of cash or securities in exchange for fixed quarterly annuity payments for life. After the Lord calls the member home, the remainder of the gift annuity will be distributed to the congregation or ministry as designated. Income payments from a charitable gift annuity may begin immediately, may be deferred until a specific date in the future, or may be deferred until an unspecified date in the future.

As of Dec. 31, 2023, WELS Foundation administered 676 charitable gift annuities with a total market value of \$14.1 million.

Charitable remainder trusts

A charitable remainder trust is created when a donor transfers cash, securities, or real estate into a charitable trust but keeps a specified income interest—usually for life. When the trust ends per the donor’s designation, the assets in the trust pass to the designated beneficiaries such as the church and/or synod.

As of Dec. 31, 2023, WELS Foundation serves as trustee for 111 charitable remainder trusts with a combined market value of \$26.1 million.

Donor-advised funds

A donor-advised fund is a charitable giving vehicle wherein an individual, family, or corporation makes an irrevocable, tax-deductible contribution of cash, securities, or other property to WELS Foundation and at any time thereafter can recommend grant distributions to qualified WELS ministries. The fund can be established with current gifts, deferred gifts (i.e., charitable gift annuities, charitable remainder trusts), and testamentary gifts (i.e., wills, living trusts, beneficiary designations of life insurance policies, or retirement accounts).

The WELS Foundation donor-advised fund program provides an alternative to a private family foundation. WELS members can accomplish many of the same goals but with far less administrative work and expense.

As of Dec. 31, 2023, WELS Foundation administered 88 donor-advised funds with a total market value of \$6.2 million.

Pass-through gifts processed

Not all WELS ministries have the capacity to process complex gifts. At the request of donors, during the fiscal year ending June 30, 2023, WELS Foundation distributed \$2.5 million to WELS ministries from 729 pass-through gifts. These gifts included assets such as appreciated securities, qualified charitable distributions from IRAs, real estate, life insurance contracts, and agricultural crops. Proceeds from these gifts are distributed to the WELS ministries designated by the donor.

Other gift administration services

WELS Foundation also provides gift administration for letters of instruction, gifts of securities, qualified charitable distributions from IRAs, real estate gifts, life insurance contracts, agricultural crops, and other donor-designated gifts.

Educational webinars

In 2023, WELS Foundation hosted a series of 12 educational webinars. The monthly webinars were timely presentations on various planned giving topics and made available by WELS Foundation at no cost to WELS Christian giving counselors, mission advancement officers, and congregational planned giving committee leaders.

A look ahead

WELS Foundation continues to produce videos that focus on the blessings and benefits of planned gifts. View the WELS Foundation videos at vimeo.com/showcase/9415316. Other marketing efforts include reports to WELS conferences and conventions and a newsletter for our WELS Foundation partners with resources to help them serve their donors. WELS Foundation also sponsored the mission advancement sectionals at the WELS Association of Lutheran High Schools conference in February 2024 and will continue to have a sponsorship and display presence at local and national WELS events. In conjunction with WELS Ministry of Christian Giving, WELS Foundation will continue to produce *Grace of Giving*, a biannual newsletter to WELS donors and pastors that highlights planned gifts and how they can benefit gospel work. WELS Foundation, in partnership with WELS Church Extension Fund, also provides marketing materials and promotional items to Lutheran Women’s Missionary Society rallies and other WELS gatherings as requested.

To carry out its mission, WELS Foundation will continue to identify the most cost-effective means to:

- Provide knowledgeable planned giving support to members through WELS Christian giving counselors and other WELS mission advancement representatives.
- Provide various planned giving opportunities, including charitable gift annuities, charitable remainder trusts, donor advised funds, and endowment administration.
- Provide printed and online educational material regarding various planned giving opportunities benefiting WELS ministries.

Learn more about WELS Foundation at wels.net/foundation.

Mr. James Holm, reporter

Mr. Mark Maurice, chairman

Mr. Mark Schulz, vice chairman

Mr. Michael Krueger, secretary

Mr. Kyle Egan, *ex officio*, WELS chief financial officer and treasurer

Rev. Jonathan Kolander

Mr. Scott Neitzel

Mr. John Pahmeier

Mr. David Wendland

Advisory:

Rev. Kurt Lueneburg, director of WELS Ministry of Christian Giving

Rev. Paul Prange, administrator of WELS Board for Ministerial Education

WELS Investment Funds, Inc.

Our calling

WELS Investment Funds, Inc., was established in 1997 to serve under the Synodical Council by providing investment portfolios for the benefit of WELS and its schools, congregations, and other affiliated organizations.

Our current situation

WELS Investment Funds provides cost-effective, professionally-managed investment portfolios. WELS Investment Funds currently manages more than \$300 million of investments for WELS ministries, including more than 255 congregations and WELS-affiliated ministries. WELS congregations, area Lutheran high schools, and other affiliated ministries are encouraged to utilize WELS Investment Funds for their long-term investment needs, such as endowment and scholarship funds. By pooling our God-given talents and resources with other congregations, we can take advantage of lower-cost, institutionally-priced investment opportunities that would not otherwise be available. As more congregations and organizations invest in WELS Investment Funds, the cost-reduction benefits also increase. It's another way we can help support each other.

The WELS Investment Funds Board of Directors is responsible for the overall operations of WELS Investment Funds. The directors are members of WELS congregations, nominated from throughout the synod, vetted by WELS Human Resources, and appointed by the Synodical Council. Currently eight qualified directors serve on the board. The day-to-day operations are carried out by WELS employees leased to WELS Investment Funds.

The board has retained Mercer Investments LLC (Mercer) as the investment consultant for WELS Investment Funds. As a co-fiduciary, Mercer is responsible for making investment recommendations to the board. Once the recommendation is approved by the board, the investment consultant has the discretion to implement and oversee the investment recommendations.

Vanguard, our previous investment consultant, announced in 2023 that it made the strategic decision to focus on serving retail clients and exit the institutional advisory business. On March 15, 2024, it transferred its Vanguard Institutional Advisory Services unit to Mercer, an established leader in the OCIO (outsourced chief investment officer) industry. Most of the Vanguard Institutional Advisory Services team members joined Mercer and continue to serve existing clients. Mercer is committed to delivering the investment approach and service level consistent with what our investors experienced at Vanguard.

WELS Investment Funds offers four investment portfolios, collectively known as the WELS Funds.

The WELS Balanced Fund seeks long-term capital growth and a low to moderate level of current income. It has a target asset allocation comprised of 60 percent equity and 40 percent fixed income and has a mid- to long-range investment time horizon.

The WELS Endowment Fund seeks long-term capital growth with some current income and is designed primarily for endowment funds. It has a target asset allocation comprised of 75 percent equity and 25 percent fixed income and has a long-range investment time horizon.

The WELS Equity Fund seeks long-term capital growth by investing in a portfolio of equity securities that is diversified by industry and company size. It is composed of 100 percent equities and has a long-range investment time horizon.

The WELS Income Fund seeks to provide income by investing primarily in investment-quality debt securities. It is composed of 100 percent fixed income securities and has a short- to mid-range investment time horizon.

The WELS Balanced Fund and WELS Endowment Fund invest in differing ratios of the same underlying mutual funds as the WELS Equity and WELS Income Funds. The WELS Equity Fund and WELS Income Fund are for ministries that desire an asset allocation other than the WELS Balanced Fund and WELS Endowment Fund.

Calendar year 2023 saw both equities and bonds bouncing back from a dismal 2022. Improved corporate earnings, cooling inflation, and expectations for Federal Reserve interest rate cuts were the main drivers. The U.S. continued to lead in economic growth, labor market strength, and consumer spending among major economies, resulting in U.S. markets broadly outperforming the rest of the world. Volatilities and uncertainties had been high throughout the year, which were punctuated with events such as the regional banking crisis in the U.S. and new conflicts in the Middle East. The WELS Investment Funds portfolios continue to maintain diversified exposure aligned with strategic asset allocation targets with a combination of indexed and actively managed funds.

Additional information, including director biographical information, the investment policy statement, audited financial statements, and the 2023 annual report to WELS ministries, is available at wels.net/welsfunds.

A look ahead

Marketing and communication efforts include the distribution of quarterly WELS Fund Fact sheets and live quarterly update webinars for investors that include a quarterly market recap, an investment performance review for the WELS Funds, and Mercer's market and economic outlook. Each quarter, more and more WELS members are tuning in to these updates to learn how their congregation or organization's investments are making an impact on ministry. Ongoing marketing efforts include the production of WELS Investment Funds videos, brief Q&A videos regarding topics impacting our investors, quarterly reports to WELS conferences and conventions, and an in-person display presence at nationwide WELS events.

WELS Investment Funds is committed to continuing to serve WELS congregations, area Lutheran high schools, and other affiliated ministries. Those responsible for overseeing the long-term investments for their organization are encouraged to review their investment objectives, asset allocation, investment costs, and time horizons.

WELS Investment Funds is hoping to continue to grow the investment portfolios and is willing to work with ministries to review their investment needs. To schedule a free review, either in person or via conference call or video, contact us at 414-256-3206 or jim.holm@wels.net.

Mr. James Holm, reporter

Mr. Dennis Walters, chairman

Mr. Joel Luehmann, vice chairman

Mr. John Wenker, secretary
Rev. em. Charles Degner
Mr. Kyle Egan, *ex officio*, WELS chief financial officer and treasurer
Mr. Seth Hansen
Mr. Ronald Schmitz
Mr. Max Wenck

Advisory:

Rev. Kurt Lueneburg, director of WELS Ministry of Christian Giving

WELS Benefit Plans

Our calling

The WELS Benefit Plans Office (the “Benefit Plans”) serves synodical workers and organizations through the administration of the WELS Voluntary Employees’ Beneficiary Association (VEBA), the WELS Pension Plan, and the WELS Shepherd Plan. Oversight of the VEBA Plan is the responsibility of the WELS VEBA Commission, and oversight of the Pension and Shepherd Plans is the responsibility of the WELS Retirement Program Commission. The commission members are appointed by WELS Synodical Council. Each commission is composed of a pastor and a male teacher from the called worker roster, four laymen, and the *ex-officio* member. Contributions toward the cost of plan benefits and operations are held in separate trusts, each invested in diversified accounts with outside money managers overseen by an independent investment advisory firm. The plans employ outside professionals that provide benefit design, actuarial, consulting, banking, legal, and auditing services.

Our current situation

Much of the work to freeze the Pension Plan and begin providing retirement benefits through defined contributions to workers’ Shepherd Plan accounts was completed by the end of 2022. In 2023, the focus of the Retirement Program Commission and Benefit Plans shifted to improving Shepherd Plan administrative efficiencies and evaluating options to improve worker benefits in future years.

Improved efficiencies have allowed defined contributions to be deposited into workers’ Shepherd Plan accounts earlier in each quarter since the retirement program transition, providing workers with earlier access to the investment and use of those funds. Additionally, the significant growth in Shepherd Plan participants and assets resulted in a 10 percent decrease to Shepherd Plan administrative fees paid by participants effective Oct. 1, 2023, as the total market value of Shepherd Plan assets increased from \$223.7 million as of Dec. 31, 2022, to \$289.4 million as of Dec. 31, 2023 (+29.3 percent).

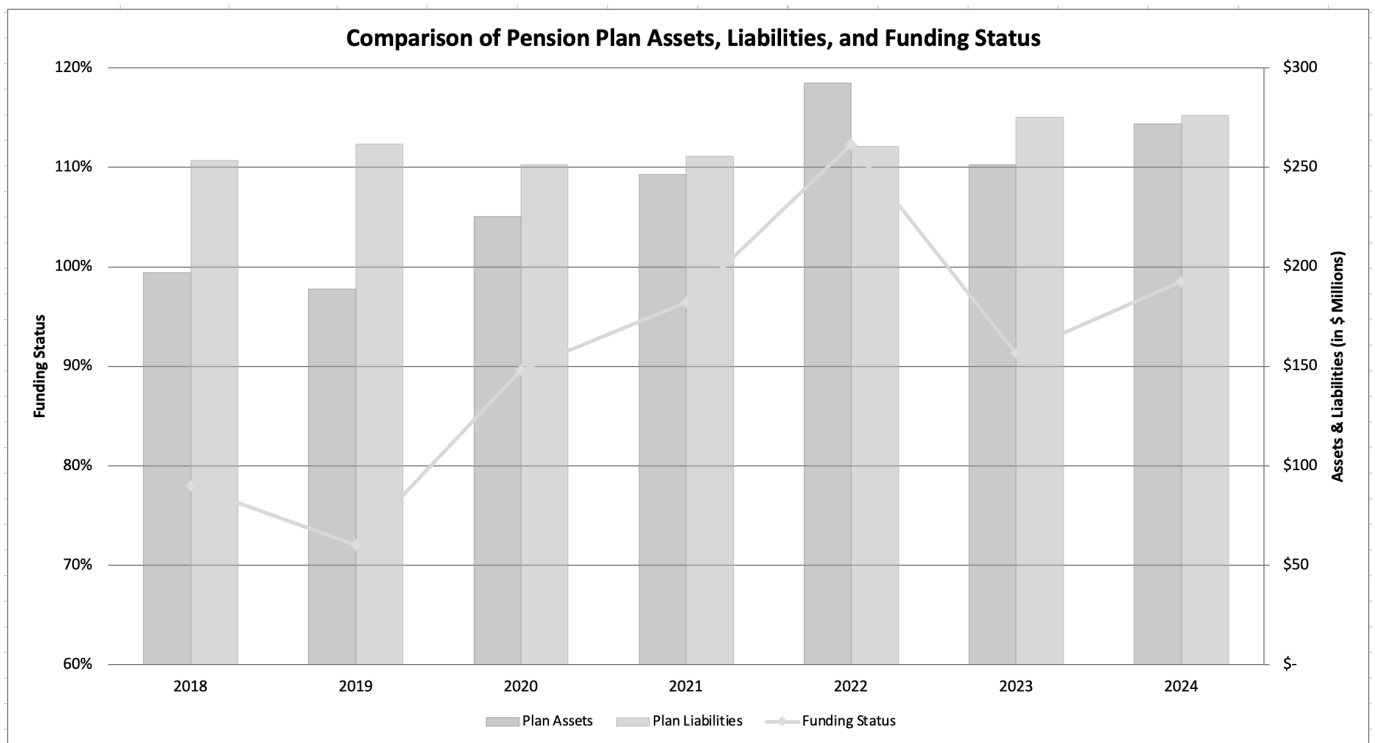
The Pension Plan’s funded status (which compares the plan’s assets with the present value of benefits earned by participants) increased from 91 percent as of Jan. 1, 2023, to 98 percent as of Jan. 1, 2024, based on the Retirement Program Commission’s actuarial assumptions. This funded status improvement permitted the commission to keep the quarterly retirement contribution rate charged to calling bodies unchanged for 2025 and will mark the fifth consecutive year of no increases to this rate.

The VEBA Commission welcomes the opportunity to serve a growing number of workers and calling bodies, as VEBA Plan membership increased by more than 7 percent during 2022–23 while more than 80 percent of calling bodies continue to participate. However, VEBA Plan claims experience turned sharply worse following the COVID-19 public health emergency due to a return to care utilization, significant cost inflation, and more severe catastrophic claim situations. The addition of government-required benefits for COVID-19 and mental health parity, as well as compliance with new government reporting requirements, has also increased VEBA Plan costs.

Although the VEBA Commission provided rate stability by not increasing rates for the 2021 and 2022 plan years, the aforementioned headwinds required rate increases of 9.5 percent for 2023 and 11 percent for 2024.

To ensure that the VEBA Plan maintains sufficient reserves during this high-cost period, for 2025 the VEBA Commission will consider increasing rates (potentially in the double digits) and deductible and coinsurance amounts to maintain pace with inflation. The plan design changes may include discontinuation of the \$500/individual and \$1,000/family deductible amounts currently available under VEBA plan option 1. In addition, the commission will use new plan experience data to consider updating the differences in rates by geographical area (i.e., rate regions).

The Pension and VEBA trusts achieved investment gains of 11.9 percent and 6.7 percent, respectively, in 2023, while the trusts experienced investment losses of 11.4 percent and 7.6 percent, respectively, in 2022. Unaudited results from the 2023 plan year show net assets available for benefits in the Pension and VEBA trusts as \$271.8 million and \$33.5 million, respectively. In comparison, final audited results from the 2022 plan year show net assets available for benefits in the Pension and VEBA trusts as \$251.1 million and \$35.8 million, respectively. Both commissions continue to evaluate investment allocation and diversification strategies that are expected to achieve target returns with reduced risk.



A look ahead

The commissions and Benefit Plans will continue their emphasis on maintaining long-term stability for the VEBA, Pension, and Shepherd Plans while considering new ways to engage participants and calling bodies through improved communications.

The Retirement Program Commission will continue to balance the need to preserve the security of Pension Plan benefits earned by workers with the desire to enhance the defined contribution plan, while minimizing the cost to calling bodies. The commission closely monitors the retirement benefit contribution rate charged to calling bodies and its impact on the Pension Plan’s funded status. The Commission also monitors the Shepherd Plan’s financial activities and noticed that only 52 percent of workers who received defined contributions also contributed their own dollars to their Shepherd Plan accounts in 2023. The Shepherd Plan provides a diversified set of investment options and helpful financial planning resources for workers to manage the contributions made to their accounts. Increasing awareness of these opportunities will help workers to meet their financial goals for retirement. In addition, because retirement benefit contributions are made to workers’ accounts each quarter, it is more important than ever for organizations to report call status changes to WELS quickly so that workers receive the correct contributions.

The VEBA Commission and its advisors will carefully monitor the higher inflation environment and uncertainties with financial markets and the long-term impacts of the pandemic as well as their impacts on the VEBA Plan. It is likely that VEBA Plan rates will increase more significantly than in recent years to offset cost inflation and maintain adequate reserves. In addition, the VEBA Commission and Benefit Plans will be more closely observing worker participation in the VEBA Plan and health care arrangements at participating calling bodies to protect the Plan's long-term sustainability in the rapidly changing health care environment. Providing an affordable health plan with consistent nationwide benefits is essential to supporting synodwide mission and ministry activities.

Benefit Plans, as well as the VEBA and Retirement Program Commissions, are acutely aware of the need to keep benefit plan costs as low as possible to allow calling bodies to preserve valuable assets to fund ministry efforts. The primary goal for the benefit plans going forward is to strike the best balance between acceptable costs to calling bodies and meaningful benefits to participants.

Mr. Joshua Peterman, reporter

WELS VEBA Commission:

Mr. Kyle Koltz, chairman

Mr. Todd Poppe, vice chairman

Mr. Robert Bullens, secretary

Mr. Kyle Egan, *ex-officio*, WELS chief financial officer and treasurer

Mr. James Gabriel

Teacher Daniel Markgraf

Rev. Joel Sauer

Advisory:

Ms. Christine Hitter, membership manager of WELS Benefit Plans

Mr. Joshua Peterman, director of WELS Benefit Plans

Ms. Lori Schrank, claims manager of WELS Benefit Plans

WELS Retirement Program Commission:

Mr. Thomas Medema, chairman

Mr. Lee Miller, vice chairman

Mr. James Brenn, secretary

Mr. Kyle Egan, *ex-officio*, WELS chief financial officer and treasurer

Teacher James Hahm

Mr. Samuel Kruschel

Rev. James Turriff

Advisory:

Ms. Christine Hitter, membership manager of WELS Benefit Plans

Mr. Joshua Peterman, director of WELS Benefit Plans

Northwestern Publishing House

Our calling

The WELS Constitution states, "The object and purpose of the synod shall be to extend and conserve the true doctrine and practice of the Evangelical Lutheran Church." As outlined in the constitution, Northwestern Publishing House (NPH) fulfills this object and purpose "by printing, publishing, purchasing, selling, and disseminating literature that maintains Lutheran doctrine and practice" and "by furnishing appropriate literature for parish schools, Sunday schools, missions, institutions, and churches." NPH is governed by a board of directors responsible for fulfilling this purpose through establishing employee duties and adopting policies for the operation of NPH.

The mission of Northwestern Publishing House is to deliver biblically sound, Christ-centered resources within the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod and beyond. For 133 years, NPH has prepared materials that are consistent with this mission and aligned with Lutheran doctrine and practice. The proceeds NPH receives from sales of materials to individuals, congregations, and schools are used to develop and publish new and relevant resources and materials. Our calling, then, is to continue to proclaim God's love in Christ through the careful use of the resources God grants to us through purchases of the resources and materials we make available.

Our current situation

We humbly thank God for all he has done to protect our workers and set before us many ministry opportunities over the past 12 months. While challenges to Christian publishing and supply chain remain, NPH is positioned, God willing, to provide long-term, sustainable service to the church and fulfillment of the synod's objective of publishing literature that maintains our Lutheran doctrine and practice.

Print publishing program

NPH continues to publish new books, music, and many other valued Christ-centered resources every year. NPH constantly seeks new ways to remain good financial stewards by achieving greater efficiencies and reducing printing expenses through pursuing multiple print bids, just-in-time printing of short print runs, print-on-demand, and digital distribution.

Pastors, teachers, WELS members, and other Christians can find a continuously expanding selection of new resources along with previously published NPH books, Bible studies, curriculum, church supplies, and doctrinally reviewed books and materials from other publishers at NPH's website, **nph.net**, or by calling 800-662-6022.

Over the last year, NPH published:

Books

An Ever-Present Help in Trouble (NPH version of Christian Aid and Relief devotional)

At Home with the Psalms (republished book)

The Baptismal Life

God's Great Gift

The Heart of Faith

Mary, Providential Earthly Mother of God (women's Bible study)

My 180: Waiting on God More

My Christian Worship (worship notebook)

Seeing God's Heart

The Splendid Task of the Ministry: A Pastoral Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles

WELS Yearbook 2024

Periodicals

Forward in Christ

Meditations

Music

Curriculum

Hymns for Life, Year C (course for primary, middle, upper grades)

Keyboard music

7 Hymn Preludes for Organ

All His Wonders Tell (piano)

Creative Hymnodist: Hymns about God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

Dawns the Day (organ)

Hymns for Life Easy Accompaniments (seven volumes)

Five Hymn Preludes for Organ

From Folk Song to Hymn Tune (piano duets)

Key Change Collection (organ—previously published, updated to CW21 keys)

Lord, Let Your Mercy Overflow (piano)

More Songs from the Spirit (piano)

Now All I Know Is Grace

Short Seasonal Preludes for Organ: Blessing and Thanksgiving
Sing God's Glorious Praises (piano)
Singing the Small Catechism

Choral pieces

All Men Living Are But Mortal (SATB, organ, cong., trumpet, trombone)
All Praise to You, Eternal God (unison and piano)
Behold, a Branch Is Growing (unison, piano, opt. C instrument)
God Is Here! As We Your People (SA(T)B, organ, cong., children, brass, timpani, cymbal)
God of the Cross (SAB and piano)
God's Own Child, I Gladly Say It (SATB, organ, violin, cello)
How Sweet It Is, My God and King (unison and piano)
I Am Jesus' Little Lamb
I Lift Up My Eyes to the Hills (SATB)
Lord Jesus Christ, the Church's Head (SATB, keyboard, cong., brass, handbells)
O God, O Lord of Heaven and Earth (choral piece)
Praise Be (two-part and piano)
Praise to the Lord, the Almighty (two-part mixed, opt. cong., treble inst., keyboard)
Reformation Song (two-part, piano, flute)
Savior, When in Dust to You

Worship resources

Bulletin Subscription Series, Year A
Bulletin Subscription Series, Year B
Christian Worship: Commentary on the Propers, Year B
Christian Worship: Easy Hymn Accompaniments—Chorale
Christian Worship: Easy Hymn Accompaniments—Piano
Christian Worship: Foundations, hymnal committee
Christian Worship: Playlist
God on Trial (Lenten sermons and kit for 2024)
Joy Has Dawned (Christmas Kit and Bulletins 2024)
What a Story! (Christmas Kit and Bulletins 2023)

Digital publishing program

NPH continues to expand content in ways that are relevant today with 248 books in e-book format, distribution of 154 titles through Logos, 2,709 downloadable products, 5 audiobooks, digital *Forward in Christ*, and the *Meditations Daily Devotional* app for both iOS and Android platforms. While digital publishing is an important strategy for NPH, distribution of digital products represents a relatively small portion of a publisher's sales, and therefore print versions remain critical to NPH's success as a ministry.

Bible studies

NPH publishes Bible studies on a variety of subjects, including books of the Bible; current religious, moral, and social topics; and studies of our Lutheran heritage. NPH Bible studies are offered in a variety of formats to meet the needs of churches today, including traditional adult group studies and small group studies, both adaptable for online virtual learning. With the objective of serving our churches with timely and relevant Bible studies, NPH released these studies in 2023: *Esther*, *Living My Life as a Christian*, and *My Life for the Kingdom*.

NPH, in collaboration with Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and WELS Commission on Discipleship, produces the monthly *Teach the Word* e-newsletter that provides practical advice and information to help pastors better understand adult and child learning and strengthen their teaching skills. At present, more than 900 pastors and church leaders subscribe to *Teach the Word*. To subscribe, visit nph.net/teach-the-word.

Christian Worship: Musician's Resource

The new *Christian Worship: Musician's Resource* is a powerful web-based tool that allows musicians to access, purchase, and print scores for a wide variety of instruments for the rites, psalms, and hymns in the new hymnal and Psalter, enabling them to contribute their talent in worship. *Christian Worship: Musician's Resource* currently has more than 1,100 musical resources and is continuing to grow.

Church supplies

An increasingly popular communion cups and wafers auto-ship service is now available for all churches. The program provides churches with easy and automatic replenishment of communion supplies. A full range of church supplies are available online and for pickup at the NPH office.

Collaborative projects

NPH continues to collaborate with WELS commissions, committees, and WELS-affiliated organizations. Collaboration with WELS Christian Aid and Relief produced the booklet *An Ever-Present Help in Trouble* for distribution to those facing natural disaster recovery and other challenges. Ongoing collaboration continues between NPH and Multi-Language Productions with NPH providing content that is translated by Multi-Language Productions for use throughout the world and customer service, marketing, sales, and distribution services for Multi-Language Productions' materials and resources.

A look ahead

Anticipated projects (2024–2026, some titles are preliminary)

Books

90 Devotions in 90 Days (devotions from Special Ministries and Resilient Recovery)

Books, Footnotes, Translations (People's Bible Discovery series)

Christ Through Us (WELS 175th anniversary pictorial history)

Ephesians, The Unsearchable Riches of Christ (devotional commentary)

EHV large-print Bible

From Heaven Above (Advent-Christmas devotions)

Galatians, the Beating Heart of the Gospel (devotional commentary)

God, Can I Complain? (Cancer series)

God, Where's My Hope? (Cancer series)

God, Why Is This Happening? (Cancer series)

Gospel-Centered Mentoring

Human Sexuality

Jungle Journals (four-book series)

Luther's Small Catechism, revised edition (NIV, EHV, and ESV)

Marriage Moments, expanded, written edition

My 180: Trusting God More (My 180 series)

On Offering Prayers to God (prayer collection)

Open My Heart to Hear (hymn-based devotions)

Peter, Theologian of the Cross (lay theology growth)

Seeking a Gentle and Quiet Spirit (women's Bible study)

Spiritual Musings of a Simple Mother

The Story of God's Love (audiobook)

There's a Prayer for That, large print edition

These Words Are Written (devotional)

What Does This Mean? (devotions through the catechism)

"Who Do You Say I Am?"—Answers Right From Jesus (devotional)

The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans, revised and updated

Your Word for Mine: Real Crises—Real Rescue

Bible studies

5-Minute Bible Studies for Women

A Congregation in Crisis (Bible course on 1 Corinthians)

Active Learning Resources for Growing in Grace (workbook for Shrimpton's catechism course)

Girl Time (multi-generational discussion and retreat study)

Growing in the Word (catechism course by Shrimpton)

Human Sexuality Bible study

A Look at the Lutheran Liturgy (twenty 19-minute lessons)

Pre-marriage course and workbook for churches

Quick to Listen (eponymous Bible course on the book)

What Do You Want in Your Church? (Bible course on the seven letters in Revelation)

Periodicals

Forward in Christ

Meditations

Music

Keyboard music

Hymn of the Day Organ Prelude Series (8 of 11 volumes by spring 2026)

Choral pieces

Round Me Falls the Night (SATB and piano)

Rush, Spirit, Now My Portals (SATB and piano)

Servants of Your Word (SATB and piano)

To You, O Lord, Our Hearts We Raise (SATB, keyboard, C instrument)

Worship resources

Bulletin Subscription Series, Year C

Bulletin Subscription Series, Year A

Christian Worship: Hymnal, large print edition

Christian Worship: Musician's Resource (ongoing development)

Christian Worship: Parish Guidebook

I Can Go to Church (worship tool for children with autism)

Reflections on Repentance (Lenten sermons and kit, 2025)

It Is Finished (Lenten sermons and kit, 2026)

Our thanks

First and foremost, we humbly and gratefully give thanks to our gracious God who has sustained us and allowed us to continue serving him in his kingdom work of spreading the gospel.

One of NPH's key objectives is to help our synod's called workers combat the false doctrine and humanistic philosophy that tempt those they serve to stray from God's truth. We work diligently to support them with trustworthy ministry tools that provide biblically sound, Christ-centered, and confessional Lutheran teaching.

We thank the many pastors, staff ministers, and teachers who make NPH a trusted partner in their ministry.

Mr. Jeremy Angle, reporter

Rev. Luke Werre, chairman

Mr. Dwight Luedtke, vice chairman

Mr. Jeremy Korell, treasurer

Mr. Matthew Groth, secretary

Rev. Justin Dauck

Mr. Kyle Egan, *ex-officio*, WELS chief financial officer and treasurer

Prof. Paul Koelpin

Prof. Steven Pagels

Mr. John Pratt

Mr. Joel Raasch

Administrative officers:

Mr. Jeremy Angle, president

Rev. Chris Cordes, vice president, publishing

Mr. Eric Krueger, vice president, finance and accounting

Committee on Constitutional Matters

Our calling

The Committee on Constitutional Matters serves under the Conference of Presidents to interpret the constitution and bylaws for the synod and its constituency. It is responsible for maintaining and distributing accurate updates of these documents as changes are made by the synod in convention.

Our current situation

In addition to revising the document to incorporate the amendments approved by the 2023 synod convention, the committee has been asked to address six questions on constitutional matters since the convention to the date of this report.

The current editions of the WELS Constitution and Bylaws and the Constitution for the Districts are available at wels.net/about-wels/synod-reports. You may also contact the President's Office to request a printed copy.

Rev. Eric Steinbrenner, reporter

Rev. Eric Steinbrenner, chairman

Mr. Kenneth Gosch

Rev. Richard Waldschmidt

