

REPORT OF THE PRESIDENT

WELS 66th Biennial Convention

July 26–28, 2021

Five hundred years ago, Martin Luther stood before a gathering of the most powerful political and religious leaders in the world in the German city of Worms. He had been summoned there with the demand that he retract the things he had said and written regarding how the church of his day had strayed from the truth of the Scriptures. Knowing that a refusal to meet those demands could very likely result in his death, Luther nevertheless stood firm. He then spoke those famous words that we recall to this day: “Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted, and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Amen.”

It’s not clear whether Luther actually spoke the words, “Here I stand; I can do no other,” but stand is exactly what he did. He stood firmly on the Scriptures and on the truth that those Scriptures proclaimed. He stood firmly on the grace of God and on the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He stood anchored in the clear promises that God had given to him and to all believers.

So today, 500 years later, the theme of this convention presents us with an opportunity—as individuals, as congregations, and as a synod—to stand exactly where Luther stood, on the unchanging Word of God as proclaimed in the Scriptures.

By the grace of God—not by our own power or strength—we stand on those Scriptures because everything they tell us—about God, about history, about our Savior, about ourselves—is absolutely and unchangeably true. In a world where absolute truth is claimed not to exist, in a world where what is seen today as true can be discarded as myth and fairy tale tomorrow, in a world where the lies of Satan have captured the minds and hearts of so many, God’s truth is the only foundation on which his church today can stand if we are to remain faithful to him and if we as God’s people are to carry out our God-given mission of proclaiming his saving message to the world.

The culture surrounding us will attack God’s truth and those who hold to it. What God has told us about marriage, about gender, about racial issues, about

human life, about respect and love for others, about creation, about the depravity and lost condition of human beings by their very nature—the list is endless—is being attacked and undermined relentlessly. Those truths and the people who hold to them are under attack from a godless culture, an unbelieving world, and even from a large segment of the Christian church. Faithful Christians standing on the truth of God’s Word may not be hauled before the emperor and threatened with death, but know that we will be attacked. We will be accused of being ignorant, mired in the past, backwards and gullible, bigots and haters. The forces of Satan will do all they can to silence and muzzle us from proclaiming and teaching the truth that God has entrusted to us. It has never been easy for the church, and it will only get harder as we continue living in these last days.

Our only defense against these attacks is to do what Luther did. To stand boldly on the truth of God’s Word. To speak the message that he has entrusted to us. To trust in the promises that he has graciously given us. To look to that Word for the strength of faith, the clarity of conviction, and the boldness to be faithful witnesses. To say with the apostles, “We can’t help speaking about the things we have seen and heard.”

And as we stand on the Scriptures, as we grasp by faith the truths that God has given to us, he promises to bless us with a growing faith, with an unchanging joy no matter what the circumstances, and with a zeal to lead sinners to the cross and the empty tomb of Christ.

No matter what issue or task our synod addresses, it’s on that unchanging foundation of God’s Word that we pray our synod will remain centered and from which it will be blessed with strength and faithfulness.

The last year and a half presented us with some unprecedented challenges. In just a matter of weeks, the world changed with the emergence of the COVID-19 virus. We were faced with restrictions imposed by the government to slow the spread of the disease. Some of those restrictions impacted the very heart of what our mission is: public worship and the preaching of the gospel. We wrestled with the responsibility to respect the governing authorities as long as they were not commanding us to go against the clear teachings of Scripture. We struggled to find the balance between showing love and concern for our neighbor on the one hand and resisting pressure to back away from public

worship on the other. It was gratifying to see how congregations, despite the limitations and restrictions that were imposed, found new and creative ways to see to it that worship and the preaching of God's Word would continue. Congregations took steps to follow guidelines calling for social distancing and careful hygiene without giving in to pressure to discontinue public worship altogether. Members of congregations worked very hard to be good citizens when it came to the protocols imposed. Others who were not as convinced about the need for such measures showed patience with those who desired a more careful approach.

But that wasn't always the case. Every congregation of our synod is comprised of people who have different opinions when it comes to things that are not decided by Scripture. In some congregations such differences of opinion sometimes pitted member against member, pastor against congregational leadership, called worker against called worker. It's my prayer that those divisions in outward matters have been resolved by Christians who have prayed for Christian patience and love for those who may have disagreed with them. That's a prayer that all of us need to pray. What a tragedy it would be if simmering hard feelings over outward issues would lead us to forget the spiritual unity that we have been given in Christ and distract us from the mission God has given us to carry out.

As a delegate to this convention, you are experiencing one way in which the synod was impacted by the pandemic. Last January, the Conference of Presidents (COP) needed to decide about how to carry out the 2021 convention. The COP could have planned to have the convention as normal. But there was no way of knowing what conditions would be in July and what restrictions might still be in place. Canceling the convention entirely was not considered a viable option. Originally the convention was scheduled to be held at Michigan Lutheran Seminary in Saginaw, Mich. At that time Michigan was under some of the tightest restrictions of any state, and it was likely that the easing of those restrictions would come later in Michigan than elsewhere. For that reason, the Conference of Presidents decided to move the convention to Luther Preparatory School in Watertown, where Wisconsin's fewer restrictions would likely have less impact. But even with that change, it was not possible to know if a convention of 400 delegates would be possible. The COP determined that, given all the circumstances, a "mini-convention" would be held in which all delegates would serve but only about 25 percent would attend the convention in person. The COP knew that this was not ideal, but it seemed to be the most prudent way to proceed.

We don't know why God permitted this pandemic to strike our world—other than to know that he always

is actively doing two things: calling us to repentance and leading us to trust in his promises with a faith made stronger by adversity. Now that the worst of the pandemic seems to be over, we look back and are assured that God was working to bless us and to bring us closer to himself. And we look forward with a rededication to being what he has intended his church to be.

In many ways, the synod has come through the pandemic in good shape and has indeed been blessed. It's likely that the restrictions and limitations on corporate worship have kindled a renewed appreciation for gathering with fellow believers to hear the Word, to worship together, and to commune alongside our fellow believers. The use of technology to continue the preaching of God's Word has likely resulted in more people hearing the gospel than otherwise would have. Perhaps the experience of seeing our whole world change in a matter of weeks is another good reminder to place our trust in God and his promises and not to take his outward blessings for granted. Financially, God's people remained faithful in bringing their offerings during the past year, and, in fact, were even more generous than before. That was true for the offerings received by the synod and, in many cases, for congregations.

With those increased offerings, no reductions in mission or ministry were required by the synod. In fact, the Synodical Council was able to approve additional resources for previously unfunded ministry. Plans are currently underway to increase the number of new home mission congregations that will be established. The Board for World Missions is working to respond to many new opportunities to share the gospel and, God-willing, will soon enter a number of new fields. The building of the school that will be used as a place to train Hmong pastors in Vietnam was delayed due to travel restrictions, but the construction is expected to begin soon (if it has not already been begun by the time of the convention). World Missions is also making good use of technology to reach thousands of people with the gospel, and in partnership with Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, the Pastoral Studies Institute (PSI) is responding to requests from around the world for theological training. Construction of fully funded new facilities on the campus of Martin Luther College has begun, both to meet the needs of the school and as part of the effort to recruit and train more students for ministry. Congregational Services, which reports to the Conference of Presidents, is working to provide resources and assistance to congregations as they address both challenges and opportunities in the areas of discipleship, evangelism, worship, special ministries, and planning. In addition to that, the work on the synod's new hymnal has been completed and is being introduced at this convention—a reminder of the value

that our synod places on corporate liturgical worship. At this convention, you will hear the details of all of this work that has continued during the pandemic and of how God is blessing those efforts.

WELS continues to experience a shortage of called workers. Congregations are experiencing longer than normal vacancies and called workers are receiving calls more frequently. It's true that the number of available workers varies from year to year and often goes in cycles. Only a decade ago we were not able to place all of our graduates. Now we face the opposite challenge of not having enough candidates for ministry. We are happy to note that seminary classes in the next few years will be larger, numbering in the 40s instead of the mid-30s. It's important that we rededicate ourselves as a synod, as congregations, and as individual called workers and lay members to recruit young people for ministry as diligently and energetically as we can. The fields are indeed ripe for harvest. Workers are needed to go into those harvest fields. Pray that God will provide workers who will serve God's people and reach the lost.

Some have been asking about the potential impact of the proposed federal Equality Act on Christian churches and religious organizations, including our own synod. The Equality Act was first passed by the U.S. House of Representatives in 2019 but was not adopted by the U.S. Senate at that time. It was passed again by the House of Representatives on February 25, 2021, and may well be introduced into the Senate in the near future. Since that time, lawsuits have also been filed in federal courts seeking to implement the provisions of the Equality Act even if it is not signed into law.

The Equality Act and the current lawsuit seek to make sexual orientation and gender identity a protected class, just like one's biological sex, under our nation's current federal non-discrimination laws. As a church we do not express opinions on purely political matters. However, the concern in this case is that aspects of the Equality Act could make it very difficult for the church to carry out its mission and could jeopardize our religious freedom to preach and teach God's Word faithfully.

At this point, there is much we don't know. For one thing, it is not known when or if the Senate will take up the bill, although it could do so at any time. For another thing, if the bill should pass the Senate, it is not known what specific restrictions would be imposed on Christian churches and institutions, what the result of the current lawsuit will be, or what the result will be when legal appeals are made to the courts in regard to religious freedom concerns.

This concern is justified, since in its present form the Equality Act appears not to provide for religious

exemptions. It is possible, therefore, that under the provisions of this act, identifying certain types of behavior as sinful could be considered unlawful hate speech. It could result in the loss of our tax-exempt status. It could also affect the ability of our colleges to receive federal funding for scholarships, grants, and loans for their students. It could create pressure on pastors to avoid some areas of biblical teaching (although we should be confident that our pastors would not succumb to that pressure). There are several other ways in which carrying out our normal daily operations as churches and schools could potentially be affected in regard to things like facilities, health insurance policies, and sports programs.

Our entire focus as a Christian church is to proclaim God's law and gospel in order to convict people of sin and to assure people of forgiveness through the sacrificial death of Christ, our Savior. We recognize that the only way for people to have an appropriate view of any situation of life, including matters of sexual identity, is to know and believe in Jesus. As a result, we do not believe that seeking to prevent a law from coming into existence will change anyone's heart. We also do not make it our goal to simply change anyone's external behavior. Further, we do not in any way condone behavior that shows hatred or disrespect to any individual. Such behavior is also sinful.

Our desire and responsibility, however, is to continue practicing our faith in humility and love, as we share with ourselves and others what God says in his Word for our eternal good. As individual Christian citizens, you may well exercise your citizenship by contacting your U.S. senators to express any concerns you may have. We encourage all of you to pray that, if the Equality Act should become law, no aspect of the law will be allowed to compromise our ability to freely share God's Word. In other words, pray that religious exemptions be maintained, as has been the constitutional right the Lord has allowed us to enjoy for many years. Although the Bible does not guarantee that right, it has been a blessing that we have cherished. If that should not be the case, then we further encourage your prayers that the Lord would give us the boldness and courage to be faithful to him, no matter the earthly consequences, as we work together as brothers and sisters in Christ to continue to carry out our Savior's mission. The work of God's kingdom will always move forward.

We will certainly need to keep alert to further developments and to communicate those when appropriate.

There are other legal issues that have the potential to affect our synod. In a case in Illinois, a Roman Catholic congregation terminated the employment of a music minister when the music minister married his same sex

partner, since that action was contrary to Roman Catholic doctrine. When the music minister sued the congregation for wrongful termination, the court ruled against the Catholic parish. The parish appealed to the federal circuit court of appeals, and a single judge denied the appeal. Then the parish appealed again, asking that the case be heard by the entire circuit court. Along with the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, WELS joined this lawsuit as a “friend of the court.” We did this because an adverse ruling in this case could very well restrict our ability to ensure that called workers in our church agree with and uphold our synod’s doctrine and practice. At the time of this writing, the case is still pending. If the court of appeals rules in favor of the terminated music minister, it is certain that the case will be appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Our synod will be facing challenges not only from our government and court system. We will also be attacked by a culture that opposes everything we believe and proclaim.

Christianity has had to deal with such attacks since New Testament times. Opponents of the gospel have not simply condemned the teachings of God’s Word; they have also sought to silence anyone who proclaims God’s truth. Jesus spent his entire ministry hounded by religious leaders who wanted nothing more than for him to be quiet. After Pentecost, when Peter and John publicly confessed Jesus as the Messiah, the Jewish leaders responded by ordering them not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John would not be silenced. They said, “We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.” One apostle after another lost his life for refusing to be silenced, but they continued to preach the good news.

Centuries later, John Hus was burned at the stake by church leaders for boldly confessing Christ after he was ordered to stop. When Martin Luther was told to keep silent about the truths that he had discovered in Scripture and about the errors of the church of his day, he kept preaching and writing. For that he was first excommunicated and then placed under a death sentence.

Faithful proclamation of God’s Word has always been met by those who want to silence God’s messengers. It’s no different for the church and for our synod today. Salvation by grace alone is dismissed as being irrelevant. The sacraments, which convey God’s forgiveness and have the power to work and strengthen faith through God’s Word and his promises, are dismissed as mere symbols or relics of the past. When the church faithfully teaches that human life begins at conception and that the taking of that life is murder, many leap to muzzle God’s truth by labeling the church as backward in its thinking and unsupportive of women. When God’s Word teaches that marriage is a lifelong union between one man and one woman, Christians are labeled as haters and bigots.

Not just the church, but individual Christians are often the targets. Maybe it’s happened in the workplace. Perhaps you’ve had friends “unfriend” you. You may have been shunned by your own family members.

In the face of all of these attempts to silence God’s truth, it’s important to remember God’s promise: “My Word will not return to me empty. It will accomplish what I please and fulfil the purpose for which I sent it.” When Satan’s allies try to silence us and our beliefs, it’s important to say with the apostles, “We can’t help speaking about what we have seen and heard.” When we state our beliefs lovingly and are accused of being closed-minded haters, it’s important that we pray that God will give us the courage and a faith that refuses to bow to a bullying culture. When our beliefs make us unpopular with the world, it’s important to say with the apostle Paul, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe.” How thankful we can be that by God’s grace, we stand firmly and steadfastly on his Word.

The synod’s membership has experienced small but consistent declines for more than a decade. Certainly, this should cause us concern. But that concern should not move us to embark on an effort to grow that depends on manmade strategies and trendy programs. What it should move us to do is to be as faithful as we can in a number of areas. First, we strive with God’s help to remain faithful to the Word (not changing the message to become more appealing or attractive). Second, we ask God to move each of our congregations and each of us as individuals to share the gospel whenever and wherever God gives the opportunity. Third, as we strive to be faithful to the Word and to our God-given mission, we trust firmly that God will work through his Word in the ways and places that he determines best—accomplishing his desire and achieving his purpose.

So, here we stand. On his Word. In his Word. Strengthened by the promises of his Word. Proclaiming his Word. There is no better place to stand.

Soli Deo Gloria!

Respectfully submitted,



Pastor Mark Schroeder, WELS President