

# Report of the President

July 2019

You are all familiar with apparent contradictions—with an emphasis on the word “*apparent*.” Apparent contradictions happen when two things at first glance and on the surface seem to be in complete contradiction to each other but are, in fact, both true.

In the opening paragraph of his classic novel *A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens describes the apparent contradictions at the time of the French Revolution: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.” Seeming opposites and contradictory statements and descriptions, but, in fact, all were true.

You can find apparent contradictions in the Scriptures as well—again with the emphasis on *apparent*—seemingly contradictory statements that are not contradictions at all: God is one God, but God is at the same time three persons. Jesus is fully divine and true God; Jesus is fully human and true man. God is perfectly and absolutely righteous, a God who by his very nature must punish sin; God is perfectly and absolutely gracious, a God who forgives the sinner and remembers his sin no more. These are apparent contradictions that human reason has trouble reconciling, but they are only *apparent* contradictions. All statements are true.

We find those apparent contradictions in our own lives. A loved one dies in Christ. We are filled with grief at our loss. But at the very same time we Christians also experience a deep and lasting joy, since we know that God has given the final victory to another of his faithful saints. We face problems in our families, struggle with issues of health and aging, experience financial hardships that seem insurmountable, and we remember the words of Jesus when he reminded us, “Little children, in this world you will have trouble.” But then he also reminds us of

the truth on the other side of that coin: “But don’t be afraid, because I have overcome the world.”

Last spring, I had the opportunity to speak to the young men who were graduating from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in the days before they would receive their first calls into the pastoral ministry. I pointed out to them that they were experiencing firsthand one of those apparent contradictions in their own lives. On the one hand, as they waited for their assignments and wondered where God would have them serve, it was agonizingly clear to them that they had absolutely no clue exactly what God had in store for them. Would they serve in a large congregation with several pastors, or would they be assigned as the sole pastor of a dual parish? Would they be sent thousands of miles away to start a new mission or serve an established congregation one hour from their childhood home in the Midwest? Would they serve in a congregation that was facing multiple challenges and dealing with all kinds of different problems? Or would they begin their ministry in a congregation where nearly everything was running smoothly and efficiently? They did not have the answers to those questions. As the day of their assignments approached and as they thought about what kind of ministries they would have, they had absolutely no clue what God had in store for them.

On the other hand, as they looked forward to their time as pastors and shepherds of God’s people, they knew *exactly* what God had in store for them. They knew that God would give them the message to proclaim—his message—the message of law and gospel as revealed in the Scriptures. They knew that the Word of God that they would preach and teach would be a powerful message—a message that, if they proclaimed it faithfully, would always accomplish his purpose and would never return to him empty. They knew that Jesus was promising that he would never leave them or forsake them and that he would be with them always. They knew that even in the face of the most vicious attacks by Satan and a

hostile, unbelieving world, that the gates of hell would never prevail against God's church. They knew that even in the face of frustrations and failure, mistakes and misjudgments, trouble or even tragedies, God had promised that he would use everything in their ministries to work out in some way for the good of those who love him. They knew that God would bless their ministries. They could take comfort in knowing *exactly* what God had in store for them.

Due to the limits of their human knowledge and understanding, what seemed like a contradiction for those graduates was absolutely no contradiction at all. Ours is a God of whom we marvel with the apostle Paul: "Oh the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord?" (Romans 11:33,34). This is the God of whom we declare with Paul, "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him!" The details of our future may be unknown to us on the one hand, but on the other hand we know exactly what God has in store for us, since he himself has promised that all things—*all things*—will work together for our good and will be used by him to carry out his good and gracious will.

It is that beautiful apparent contradiction—which is no contradiction at all—that we will want to keep in mind at this convention as we consider the work and mission of our beloved synod in terms of both the opportunities and the challenges that we face now and will face in the days and months and years to come.

The Lord Jesus has entrusted his saving gospel, as well as all the truths of Scripture, to us believers and disciples. Our stewardship of those gifts involves two important and compelling responsibilities. First, we need to hold on to those truths for ourselves. That involves committing ourselves to remain faithful to the doctrines that we have learned. It involves defending God's truth against all attacks from within and without the church. It means recognizing our Lutheran heritage, based solely on the truths of God's Word, as a treasure to be embraced and retained no matter what the cost. But the second responsibility is one that flows from the faith and joy that the gospel has worked in us. That is the responsibility to share

that good news with our children, with our friends and neighbors, with our communities and country, and ultimately with the world. And that message is not just for us and our families and for people today. It's a message that we will want to preserve and proclaim for the generations to come.

Both of those responsibilities are equally important. If we do not hold on to the truth of God's Word that he has spoken to us, if we let that message wither and fade away through neglect or through our own unfaithfulness, if we because of fear or intimidation choose to remain silent in the face of overt attacks on God's truth, we not only will not retain its blessings for ourselves, but we will have no message to share with the world or with the generations to come. And if we hold that message only for ourselves without carrying out our God-given mission to go with it into all the world, we will prove ourselves to be unfaithful witnesses and ambassadors.

Whether standing on and defending the truth of God's Word on the one hand or proclaiming and sharing his saving message with the world on the other, our synod has both opportunities and challenges. And in both cases, that same apparent contradiction applies: We have absolutely no clue what God has in store for us. But, at the same time, we know exactly what God has in store for our beloved synod.

Twenty years ago, we could not have imagined or thought possible the mission opportunities that God would now be placing before us. In East Asia, WELS' work began only a few years ago with students volunteering to teach English as a second language and to using the contacts they made to introduce people to the Savior. God blessed their efforts. Now, WELS missionaries are working in that country to serve those who have been brought to faith and who have gathered in small house churches. Even more amazing, six young men from that country were fully trained as pastors at our seminary in Hong Kong and have returned to establish a confessional Lutheran synod. In a place where we might have least expected it, the Word of the Lord is growing, and God is keeping his promises.

At this convention, you will hear about the amazing opportunity in, of all places, Vietnam. There a church

body of more than 100,000 members has asked WELS to train its pastors, because it wants its church body to be a confessional Lutheran church body. Even more amazing is that the government of Vietnam has welcomed and encouraged us to establish a theological training school there to do this work. Only a few years ago, such an opportunity would not have occurred to us. But God knew. The power of his Word made it happen. And we know that he will bless the effort. As an aside, it should be noted, as he did with the Macedonians who heard about the needs of their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem, God has moved the people of our synod to respond generously with gifts approaching \$1.4 million, more than 70 percent of the \$2 million goal that will cover the cost of land, a building, and two years of operations.

In Africa, an increasing number of small Lutheran groups have approached our synod to provide theological education for their pastors. God has blessed that work. Some of those groups have formed new confessional Lutheran synods. We will be declaring fellowship with one of those church bodies at this convention; we did the same with another at our last convention. Beyond that, former missions of WELS, now independent sister church bodies in Zambia and Malawi, are themselves planting missions in neighboring countries. The seed of the gospel is sprouting and producing fruit in new and unexpected places. Seventy years ago, when we began mission work in Africa, we could not have known these things would happen. But God did.

In places like Pakistan and Nepal—neither of which we might describe as places where the gospel would take root and flourish—the message is being spread, congregations are being formed, and the Word of the Lord continues to grow.

Here in the United States many opportunities abound to plant the seed of the gospel in new places. God has enabled us to establish dozens of new mission congregations over the past decade and has blessed those efforts with new and growing congregations. Many more places have been identified by district mission boards as potentially fertile mission fields. Added opportunities for outreach can be found in a population that is increasingly diverse, both ethnically

and culturally. Home Missions has dedicated about one-third of its resources to cross-cultural outreach in the United States and Canada, and individual WELS congregations are becoming more aware of mission opportunities in their own backyard to people of other cultures and languages. We don't know the specifics of how God will bless these efforts, but as we strive to be faithful stewards of his Word and the resources he provides, we know that bless them he will.

The online theological training provided by our *Academia Cristo* is a means that God is using to gather groups of Christians in every country in Latin America and to provide ongoing theological education to national leaders. Hundreds of thousands have been touched by this new approach to carrying out mission work. Congregations are being gathered. Spiritual leaders are being trained. The Word of the Lord is growing.

What does God have in store for us as we ponder these new and exciting opportunities? We really can't predict. We have no clue exactly how God will bless these efforts. But we do know that just as he has already blessed these efforts until now, he will continue to bless them—in his own way and in his own time, in keeping with his gracious promises.

Our synod has always considered the training of called workers to be an important part of our work. Our three-tiered system, with two prep schools, a college, and a seminary, supplemented and fed by a network of area Lutheran high schools and Lutheran elementary schools, has served us well for more than a century and a half. Other church bodies marvel at our ministerial training program and have encouraged us not to lose it. As it has done in the past, our ministerial education system continues to provide workers who are well trained in the skills they will need for their ministry. More important, it provides workers who are thoroughly trained in the truths of Scripture by faculties who are committed to those same truths.

It is true that in recent years smaller enrollments, as well as greatly expanded efforts in early childhood education and home missions, have resulted in a shortage of called workers. Especially noteworthy is the need for elementary school principals, early

childhood education (ECE) directors, and pastors. Working with Martin Luther College and the Commission on Lutheran Schools, the Conference of Presidents has been implementing several strategies to provide in-the-field training for teachers who have expressed an interest in serving as principals and ECE directors. Recruitment efforts for pastors, teachers, and staff ministers have been expanded. Increased financial aid has been the goal of several different programs at Martin Luther College (MLC). Those efforts appear to be bearing fruit. MLC's enrollment is growing, and we pray that the "Equipping Christian Witnesses" effort will result in even higher enrollment. Classes at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, recently in the low-thirties, are estimated to grow to the low forties only a few years from now, easing the pastoral shortage and providing pastors to serve in our expanding mission fields.

We do not know how and when God will bless these efforts to recruit more workers for his harvest field. In the meantime, we will continue to encourage our synod's sons and daughters to consider prayerfully whether they might serve as pastors, teachers, or staff ministers. We will pray that God provide workers to carry out this work. And we know—and of this we can be sure—that our gracious God who places ministry opportunities before us will also provide the workers to carry out that work in the time and manner that he has determined to best serve the needs of his kingdom.

As we review the state of the synod and its work, we will notice that changing demographics and other factors have created very real challenges. Synodical membership has showed relatively small (compared to other Christian denominations) but steady declines over the past three decades. During that period the most striking statistic is the decline in infant baptisms—from 8,500 in 1989 to 5,100 in 2018. The smaller number of infant baptisms mirrors the societal trend of fewer births and smaller families, and that alone accounts for most of the membership decline. The decline in membership has had a particularly large impact on small rural congregations. In addition, many of our congregations operating Lutheran elementary schools are facing the challenge of declining school enrollments.

Rather than taking comfort in the fact that WELS' membership decline is not as large as other denominations', or in the fact that fewer births and infant baptisms are circumstances beyond our control, we have begun to look closely at what we can do to reverse these trends and to capitalize on the opportunities that lie before us. It goes without saying that when it comes to growing and maintaining healthy congregations and schools, the results lie completely in the hands of the Holy Spirit as he works through his means of grace. Our goal is not numerical growth *per se* but to be as faithful as we can be in our stewardship of the means of grace. We fully trust that only God himself is the one that blesses the seed of his Word, and it is he alone who works faith in peoples' hearts.

As part of a renewed effort to preserve God's truth now and for generations to come, we have begun to focus our attention and efforts on how we can be more faithful in that stewardship of God's blessings. The commissions of Congregational Services are leading the effort to focus our attention on encouraging faithful and zealous efforts to reach the lost, nurture the saved, regain the straying, enrich and preserve our worship, and grow in our practice of faithful Christian stewardship. At this convention, you will hear much about innovative new resources that will be made available to congregations as they strive to enhance their efforts in gaining and retaining members and in the area of faithful Christian stewardship. It is my prayer that you will take what you learn back to your congregations, circuits, and districts. We don't know what God has in store for us if these efforts are carried out faithfully across the synod. But we know with certainty that he will bless those efforts in his own way and in his own time. His Word—and we depend only on his Word—will not return to him empty.

All around us are reminders that we are in the last days. Satan's attacks on God's church seem to be intensifying. Values that have stood for centuries even in non-Christian cultures are being overturned at breakneck speed. Voices advocating for abortion on demand—up to and even after the time of birth—are getting louder. Sexual immorality abounds and crosses one once-firm line after another. A growing number of Christian churches are changing or

abandoning the truths of the Scriptures and in their place embracing doctrines of demons. Many young people in our country are abandoning the church and the blessing of worship and fellowship of believers. The love of many is growing cold as racial and political conflicts continue and as violence in our streets grows. In our country, freedoms that Christians have enjoyed for centuries are under assault. The time is coming soon, I fear, when we may need to stand up and say with the apostles, “We must obey God rather than men,” and with that statement be willing to suffer what we must at the hands of a hostile and godless world.

These seem to be the worst of times, don't they? But can we also see that these are the best of times? Think of the opportunities that God is giving us to be his faithful witnesses to a world that is clearly dying in sin! Think of the motivation that should be ours as we are reminded every day that the night is coming when no one can work any longer! Think of how, as doors close on us here in the United States, God is opening other doors around the world to people who are hungering and thirsting and pleading for the truth of his Word!

Into this dark and unbelieving world God sends us. But he does not send us unequipped or alone. In fact, he has placed into our hands the very things that will enable us to be his faithful witnesses. He sends us equipped with the very things that this world desperately needs. Into this dark world God sends us with the light of the gospel, the saving message of a Savior from sin. To carry out this task, God has preserved for us our confessional Lutheran heritage—a heritage that is valuable and powerful not because it is Lutheran, but because it is a heritage built on grace alone and Christ alone and Scripture alone. He has given our synod an appreciation for the freedom that we have in Christ and with that a clear understanding of law and gospel and the need for both. He has enabled us to offer teachings from God's Word that provide hope for the future and the guidance people need for the present. He has provided us with an appreciation for worship that centers not on me but on Christ and the proclamation of his saving work. He has given us a commitment to preaching that focuses not on Christ *in me* but on Christ *for me*. He has

worked in us a commitment to defend human life, to uphold God-given values, and to show genuine Christian compassion to those in need. He has provided us with faithful pastors, teachers, and staff ministers who know God's truth and who are bold to proclaim that truth.

Equipped by God in those ways, we face the opportunities and the challenges before us with joy and confidence. Joy in the privilege God has given us to play a part in his saving work, and confidence in the fact that the results do not depend on us but are in the hands of our powerful and gracious God. No matter what the future may look like to us and to our limited human understanding, we have no fear of the future, because God is already there.

And so, since we do not know exactly what God has in store for us, today is a day for recommitment. A recommitment to standing firm on his unchanging and powerful Word. A recommitment to sharing that message with the world and passing it along to the generations to come. A recommitment to live in the joy and freedom of the gospel. A recommitment to support the work with generous and joyful giving. A recommitment to defend God's truth when it is attacked and to witness to God's truth when given the opportunity. A recommitment to support and encourage one another in Christian love and fellowship.

So, we come back to that apparent contradiction. We really have no clue exactly what God has in store for us. At the same time, we know exactly what God has in store for us. He will be with us. He will work in us. He will work through us. He will continue to bless and defend his church, and the gates of hell itself will have no power over it. No contradiction there at all. Just the joy and peace of knowing that God will keep us in his gracious and protecting hands and that he will bless our labors in his own way and in his own time.

***Soli deo gloria!***  
***To God alone be the glory!***

Respectfully submitted,  
WELS President Mark Schroeder