

President's report

WELS Convention—July 2015

In the name of Jesus, fellow servants of God by his grace alone!

Daniel found himself in a predicament. The king had ordered all of his subjects to pray to no one other than the king for 30 days. Disobedience to that law would result in a quick trip to the lions' den. But for Daniel, in spite of the clear risk, this was really no predicament at all. That very day Daniel went to his room and prayed before open windows. In spite of the very real threat to his life, Daniel did not fail to confess and demonstrate his faith in the true God.

The apostles had stood at the foot of the cross where their Master was executed by his enemies. Now, only weeks later, they found themselves confronted by those same enemies, who had ordered them to stop preaching and teaching about Jesus. They knew the risk. Their answer? "We cannot help speaking about the things that we have seen and heard."

Because of his faithful preaching of the gospel, the apostle Paul was hauled before the Roman governor, Felix. He knew that his fate was in the hands of that powerful man. But when given an opportunity to defend himself, Paul simply spoke about his faith in Jesus Christ. He did the same with the next governor and finally before the emperor himself. The threat of punishment, even execution, did not cause him to shrink. The man who said, "I am not ashamed of the gospel," proved it by his continued bold testimony.

The holy Roman emperor had declared Martin Luther to be an outlaw, able to be arrested and killed at any time because of his teachings drawn from Scripture alone. Later the emperor summoned the followers of Luther to explain their teachings and how they were different from the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. At great personal risk, Luther had written a summary of those teachings, which would later form the basis of the confession that was presented to the emperor at Augsburg. Luther wasn't the only one who boldly confessed Christ in the face of danger and death. At Augsburg that day, the Augsburg Confession was presented to the emperor and signed by dozens of laymen, who by their signature risked the loss of wealth, political positions, and their very lives.

Throughout history, when the forces of Satan have conspired and risen up to attack God's church and the gospel itself, God has enabled faithful believers to stand firm. And as those faithful witnesses stood their ground and boldly confessed, God's truth was proclaimed. His

Word, again and again as he had promised, did not return to him empty.

Today, Christians living in our country face no threat of death for what we believe and teach. We are not confronted by a government that, to this point, has attempted to silence us from proclaiming the truth of God's Word. No WELS pastor has yet been arrested for what he has preached from the pulpit.

But make no mistake, the forces of Satan in this world have continued their effort to silence the gospel and to attack God's church. In our case, those attacks have been coming from the increasingly hostile culture in which we live. Marriage has been legally redefined by the Supreme Court. Perversions of the worst kind are not only defended and promoted but glorified. Absolute truth has been replaced by personal preference and opinion. The love of many has grown cold. The very concept of sin is foreign to large segments of our society. Huge segments of the Christian church now proclaim a gospel that is no gospel at all. And those who strive to hold on to God's truth and confess it are branded as old-fashioned, closed-minded, bigoted, and hateful.

When surrounded by such a culture, there will always be the temptation not so much to deny Christ outright but to allow our attitudes and beliefs to be slowly shaped and molded to conform to the thinking around us. As public opinion changes on a wide spectrum of beliefs and values, there is always the danger that we, almost without realizing it, relinquish our firm hold on God's truth, that our focus on what God has said becomes fuzzy and blurred, and that we over time grow tired of resisting.

How do we counter those dangers and temptations? We listen to the Word. We repent of our sin. We return to the cross. We treasure the sweet news of full forgiveness in Jesus. We rejoice before the empty tomb of a victorious Savior who has made his victory ours. We respond in joyful obedience. We take courage in God's unbreakable promises. We live in love. And, like those faithful witnesses who have gone before us, we speak the things that we have seen and heard—to our children, to our friends and neighbors, to people around the world.

Armed with his promises, God's people do not cower in a cave or under a rock. The church does not retreat. The gospel, with all its saving power, does what it

always does—accomplishing God’s saving purpose until Jesus, as he promised, comes again. And we, God’s people, with confidence and optimism and joy, speak what we have seen and heard.

Thus the mission of the church is twofold: to hold faithfully to the Word of God without compromise and then to proclaim the saving message of that Word to the world.

The last two years have been years of blessing for our synod as we have worked to carry out that twofold mission. During this convention, you will hear reports from all areas in which we are working together, as people who have been made one in Christ, to do the work that God has privileged us to do. I will try not to duplicate those reports, but there are a few things that need to be highlighted.

Missions

God has enabled us to increase the number of new mission congregations that have been planted in the United States and Canada. He has blessed our efforts to reach people in a wide variety of cultures and ethnic groups. One of the new projects begun by the Joint Mission Council is to explore ways in which immigrants to our country can take the gospel back to their country of origin. That work is already being blessed with new opportunities for gospel proclamation at home and abroad.

God also continues to cause the gospel seed, planted through our world mission efforts, to grow in more than 20 countries around the world—sometimes in ways that we could not have planned or even imagined ten years ago. Whether it’s using electronic means to reach thousands of people in Latin America; students, along with WELS missionaries on the ground, sharing Jesus in East Asia; connecting with small confessional Lutheran churches in Africa; or providing Christ-centered instruction to thousands of people in the mountains of Nepal in their own language, the Lord continues to open doors for the spread of the gospel. We need to recommit ourselves to providing the resources and manpower to seize those opportunities when God places them before us.

Ministerial education

During the past biennium, we were privileged to celebrate the 150th anniversaries of both Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and Luther Preparatory School. God has certainly blessed the decision made long ago to commit our synod to the thorough training of called workers. Along with Martin Luther College and Michigan Lutheran Seminary, our ministerial education system has continued to provide a sufficient supply of well-trained and doctrinally solid pastors, teachers, and staff ministers.

In recent years, the number of graduates of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and Martin Luther College have quite closely matched the need for new called workers. Smaller class sizes at the seminary, coupled with the increased number of both retirements and new mission congregations, indicate that the need for recruitment of pastoral candidates will continue to be important in the coming years. In addition, the rapid expansion of early childhood programs and the potential growth in school enrollment due to expanded school choice in some states also indicate that the need for teacher candidates will continue.

The financial condition of our schools has improved markedly, with the two terminal schools in very strong positions, while the positions of our two prep schools have stabilized (although we do need to continue to work to improve the financial situations at both).

Congregation and Ministry Support Group

All of the entities of the CMSG continue to provide congregations with assistance in carrying out their local ministries. The work of the various commissions has shifted from producing materials to “training the trainers.” Schools of outreach and worship have been conducted in dozens of locations, and plans are in place for a school of youth ministry. Special Ministries provides leadership and assistance to congregations in a wide variety of ways. The Commission on Congregational Counseling continues to develop a synodwide opportunity for congregations to address questions about how best to plan and carry out their ministries. And the Commission on Lutheran Schools is working to help schools to improve the quality of instruction and to address challenges posed by shifting enrollments and educational trends. This remains an extremely important priority, since our system of elementary and high schools has been, and remains, a God-given blessing.

Progress toward debt retirement

The synod’s various debts were combined into a single \$22.4 million capital debt in 2009. Since then, all but \$4.7 has been paid. By resolution of the 2013 convention, a special offering to retire the debt two years early will begin with this convention. All congregations and members are encouraged to participate in this effort. Once the debt is retired, the annual amortization payment of \$1.6 million will be available to support the mission of the synod.

Ad Hoc Commission 2

The Ad Hoc Commission, established by the 2013 synod convention, will offer its report and recommendations for your consideration and action. Since some of the recommendations call for some significant changes, the floor committee dealing with the report will host an open hearing Tuesday evening.

Inter-church relations

For the past three years, WELS and Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS) representatives have been holding informal meetings with their counterparts in the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod. These meetings have been valuable in clarifying where the synods agree and differ in various areas of doctrine and practice. They have also opened lines of communication that have been beneficial in a number of practical ways. A fourth meeting is planned for December of this year.

During the past year, WELS and the ELS have begun formal doctrinal discussions with the Church of the Lutheran Confession. The issue of church fellowship and its application brought about a split in the late 1950s. Efforts were made a decade ago to heal the split on the basis of Scripture, but those efforts, while productive, were ultimately unsuccessful. After informal discussions among a group of pastors in the Mankato, Minnesota, area, the three synods agreed that formal doctrinal discussions should resume to determine whether fellowship can be restored on the basis of God's Word. Two meetings have been held; a third is scheduled for August. All involved ask for your prayers that God would bless these meetings.

Finances and Congregation Mission Offerings (CMO)

Congregation Mission Offerings remain the foundation of the financial support of our mission and ministry. CMO has been virtually flat for the past seven years, but the Synodical Council has done an admirable job in reducing costs, finding efficiencies in staffing, and utilizing funding from other sources. Two examples of such funding are the grants from the Church Extension Fund to Home Missions and from the WELS Foundation to the general operating budget of the synod.

It is true that increasing costs of ministry, especially the cost of health care and the pension plan, have created challenges to congregations to increase their CMO. But two things should be remembered. First, those same costs are incurred by the synod as it supports its workers. Second, congregations should be encouraged to remember that the cost of local ministry should not deter us from generous and growing support of the mission and ministry we do together as a synod. We are grateful for the support that the vast majority of our congregations provide and pray that God will continue to move his people to even more generous giving for missions through CMO.

Taking into consideration the anticipated funding from CMO and all other sources, the Synodical Council (SC) is proposing a Ministry Financial Plan (budget) that features no increases in operating support from the current year. If the Lord blesses us with additional financial support, the SC is presenting to this convention a prioritized list of unfunded ministries that could be implemented.

Upcoming anniversaries

Significant anniversaries lie ahead. 2017 will mark the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation. Plans for a synodwide observance are being coordinated by a special committee. Another event that should not be forgotten in 2017 is the 1917 amalgamation of the Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, and Nebraska Synods into the Wisconsin Synod we know today.

Archivist

Beginning in 1995, several WELS conventions have passed resolutions calling for a full-time synod archivist. These conventions all recognized the importance of preserving the documented history of our synod—not for history's sake but to maintain a faithful record of God's grace shown to and through our synod during its history. I am happy to report that Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary has provided funding for this position for two years using special funds on hand, and it is included in the Ministry Financial Plan for 2015–2017.

Holding on to our heritage

I've expressed the following thoughts many times before, but I believe they bear repeating. As the congregations of our synod face the challenges of an increasingly hostile culture, it is vital that we hold on to the heritage that has been passed down to us. This does not imply that we will remain focused on the past or consumed by nostalgia for a bygone era. Nor is it simply a matter of preserving the history of our synod. Rather, it means that for us to carry out our mission faithfully in the future, we need to rededicate ourselves to holding on to what is valuable and never letting it go. We need to celebrate and cherish our heritage as confessional Lutherans and all that it entails. Rather than diluting that heritage and reshaping our identity into something more generic and less distinct from other types of Christianity, or worse, abandoning it, we need to sharpen and clarify for ourselves and for others what makes our synod distinct and different. How will we do this?

- *Sola Gratia* (by grace alone), *Sola Fide* (by faith alone), *Sola Scriptura* (by Scripture alone), and *Sola Christo* (by Christ alone) will not be an empty slogan but will remain the focus and foundation of all we believe, teach, confess, and practice.
- We will train men not just as theologians, but as pastors—caring shepherds who will use their knowledge of God's Word to lead and guide God's people more deeply into the Scriptures, with all of their teaching and preaching centered on the saving gospel of Jesus Christ. We will train teachers not just to be professional educators, but as servants who recognize that their main role is to feed Jesus' lambs with his precious Word.

- Our preaching and teaching will continue to be Christ-centered and grace-proclaiming rather than an attempt to entertain, to pander to emotions, or primarily to provide guidance on how to live a happy and fulfilled life. We will recognize that God's Word faithfully preached and proclaimed will always be relevant because law and gospel will speak to the deepest spiritual needs that we sinners have. We will proclaim the whole counsel of God, not shying away from teaching those things that may be difficult for our sinful human nature to accept.
- We will commit ourselves to thorough instruction of the young. As our young people head out into the hostile worlds of secular education and employment, we will do all we can in our families and schools to provide them with a foundation that cannot and will not be shaken.
- We will emphasize the centrality of the means of grace in our lives as we worship regularly and share in the Lord's Supper often. We will bring our children and others joyfully to the font where the Spirit not only creates faith on the day of baptism but also provides a constant reminder of God's promises every day afterward.
- We will treasure and teach our heritage of Lutheran worship. We dare not abandon a treasure that has been a blessing for centuries and adopt a style of worship that is indistinguishable from the generic, shallow, and emotionally-based worship of Christian churches around us. We will teach the deep significance of the historic liturgy and strive to plan and carry out our worship with thought, with a commitment to excellence, and with the gospel freedom to adopt new hymns and forms that maintain the centrality of the gospel.
- We will hold on to the teachings and doctrines of Scripture no matter how the culture may change and no matter how strongly our beliefs may be challenged. We will never grow complacent in our knowledge of the Scriptures, but we will look continually to grow in our knowledge and depth of understanding.
- We will be zealous in taking the treasure of our gospel heritage and sharing it with as many people as possible. We will recognize that the mission God has given us is not an obligation but a privilege.
- We will look together with eager anticipation to the return of our Savior, because we know that his final victory will be our victory.

All of this we can do if, and only if, we place ourselves, our families, our congregations, and our synod into the gracious care of a God who has promised that his Word will always accomplish what he pleases and will achieve the purpose for which he sent it.

Sincere thanks

For the past eight years, you have entrusted me to serve as your synod president, and I thank you—and our gracious God—for this opportunity. It is a privilege that this sinner has certainly not deserved, and I thank him for his grace. Your prayers and words of encouragement are more appreciated than you will ever know.

In this call I've had the honor and pleasure of working with dozens of faithful and talented people who serve in their positions with dedication and joy. Whether it's leadership groups such as the Synodical Council or the Conference of Presidents, boards, committees, administrators, directors, and all the other people at the WELS Center for Mission and Ministry, I can assure you that these are people who work tirelessly on your behalf, recognizing that they serve not just you but their Savior.

May God continue to bless the small corner of his church that we call the Wisconsin Synod. May he keep us faithful, may he give us joy in our labor, and may he always keep our eyes focused on the cross where he died for us and on the heavens from which he will come again to take us home.

Soli Deo Gloria! To God alone be the glory!

Respectfully submitted,



Pastor Mark Schroeder, WELS President