

REPORT TO THE TWELVE DISTRICTS – WELS TECHNOLOGY 2018

Our Calling

WELS Technology exists to support the work of the synod by providing a capable and secure technical infrastructure, facilitating digital communications, assisting congregations and called workers to better leverage technology, and coordinating technology initiatives that can't be done at smaller organizational levels. Together the dedicated men and women that make up the WELS Technology team seek to help the spread of the gospel with technology tools the Lord continues to make available in the 21st century.

WELS Technology divides its work into ten service areas: 1) IT administration, 2) workstations and peripherals, 3) project management, 4) disaster recovery, 5) servers and storage, 6) documentation and training, 7) end-user support, 8) network and telephony, 9) application and web development, and 10) application and web maintenance.

One of the challenges of providing the appropriate technology to meet ministry needs is determining the best choice among many that are both cost effective and future-proof. It is difficult to predict if a technology chosen today will be obsolete or even “gone” tomorrow. Strategic planning is essential to being good stewards and to still meet changing needs.

It should come as no surprise that security demands much of our attention these days. While appropriate steps have always been taken to keep the synods digital assets secure, they are at even greater risk today given the current climate and prevalence of hacking, phishing, ransomware, and identity theft. More and more time and budget are spent in securing the data entrusted to the synod by churches, schools, called workers, volunteers, and donors.

Perhaps our primary calling is connecting gospel-sharers with the available technologies that can better assist in the spread of that gospel. As a result, time and resources are set aside to help with the process of making technologies available to those who would like to share the good news by “any means possible.” “Our calling” is to **find those intersections between technology and ministry.**

Our Current Situation

This year WELS Technology continued the gradual migration of the longstanding synod database called “Progress” to a newer platform called WELSource based on more modern web technologies. Thousands of hours have been spent planning and architecting a solution that will provide accurate data about our called workers, churches, schools, performance evaluations, self-assessments, pension benefits, biography printing, statistics reporting, and the calling process. This past summer Phase 3 was launched which included a new call list creation tool, the launch of a number of electronic forms including 1) Monthly Mission Reports – allows home mission sites to provide the synod with monthly status reports, 2) Campus Ministry forms –

allows students to sign up for mailings, get connected with a campus ministry and campus ministers to follow up with incoming students, and 3) Vicar in Mission Settings request forms.

Over the past year, several new websites were either launched or enhanced. An evangelism-focused website for Urdu speakers in Pakistan was completed and turned over to a national team for use and ongoing maintenance. This site increases our foreign language site launches to three (Spanish, Japanese, Urdu). A



significant amount of work has also been dedicated to a site for China outreach.

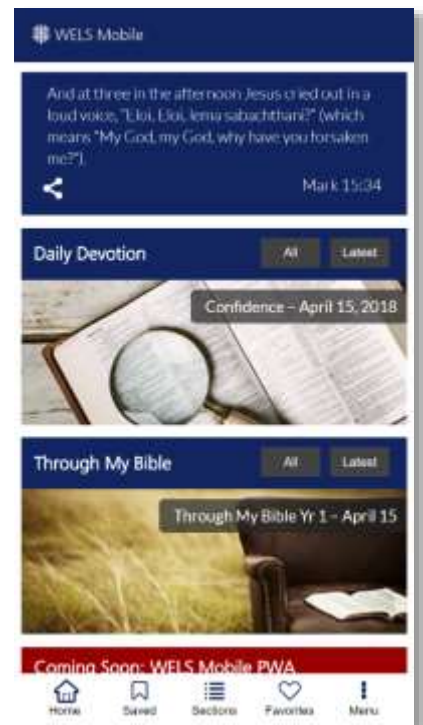
Another exciting addition is the availability of two websites for Congregational Services. The first is a master resource site that provides training materials to help congregations and schools improve their ministries, develop strategic plans and advance their work in the areas of Youth and Family Ministry, Adult Discipleship, Special Ministries, Lutheran School, Worship and Outreach. Additionally, a resource center for the visually impaired was made

available with audio-narrated content from many devotional sources. This service allows for copyrighted material to be playable or downloadable free of charge. The implementation of recent technology from Amazon makes this narration possible. We are looking for other uses of the same technology to make more and more content accessible and usable to wider audiences.

WELS Mobile was relaunched as a “progressive web application” or PWA. A progressive web app is a website that acts very much like a mobile application on a smartphone. It offers real time updates, notifications, and works better on a wider variety of smart devices (phones, tablets, e-readers, etc.) than would be possible with an app downloaded from a store like those offered by Google or Apple. You can try out WELS Mobile by visiting <https://m.wels.net> on a smartphone or tablet.

WELSTech, a weekly audio/video podcast about technology and ministry, celebrated its 500th show in 2018. The podcast continues each week with guest interviews, timely tech-in-ministry topics, tips and tools, and great feedback from the show listeners. To listen or view the show visit the show notes page for the podcast at <http://welstech.wels.net>.

The synod’s donor and financial management systems have both been “upgraded” to the latest cloud-based infrastructure. This move



makes them more usable to the financial services offices at the CMM and schools, as well as the Advancement and Christian Giving offices. In addition, since they are cloud based this insures that in the event of local digital or physical disaster, these assets and services will remain safe, accessible, and operational. Martin Luther College was not able to migrate their financial systems at this time due to dependencies on systems that are not yet compatible. Plans will be put in place to move them as soon as practical. A companion project saw the deep customizations made to the donor management package removed or recoded, so the entire application is more economically maintained.



Much work is being done to safeguard the synod's digital assets, as well as comply with national and international security and privacy laws. A full security audit is completed each year to ensure that websites that provide ecommerce functionality are secure, and appropriate policies and procedures are in place and in compliance with Payment Card Industry (PCI) standards. A relatively new compliance concern is the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) by the European Union (EU). A number of gaps were identified and have now been addressed or plans in place to comply in 2018. Remote device management and disk encryption were put in place to safeguard data. More frequent and aggressive attacks on our systems have been observed, but no violations to date. Security audits will continue and also be coordinated with other synod institutions, especially our four synod schools, subsidiaries (Church Extension Fund, WELS Investment Funds, WELS Foundation, and WELS VEBA), and Northwestern Publishing House.

Information about past, current, and future WELS Technology projects is available in real time at our Trello board: <https://cloud.wels.net/techprojects>.

Our Future

In the coming year WELS Technology will have two primary areas of focus: 1) Continue work on WELSource, the synod's primary database and associated digital forms, and 2) Continue work in hardening our security practices and infrastructure, while providing guidance to churches and schools on the same.

The WELSource project will finally sunset the old "Progress" database. This phase will see the migration of Campus Ministry data, yearbook data, and other event data into the new system. Alongside the WELSource project will continue the steady migration of paper to digital forms. Numerous forms (both paper and simple PDFs) still remain to be recreated/enhanced in the synod's forms tool. All of these efforts together will save

thousands of man hours each year in data entry and management. Many of these improvements will benefit called workers, churches, and schools as they have greater visibility into synod data that affects them and allows an easy way to keep that data up-to-date. Call lists will be more accurate, reports timelier, and access to the right forms and people more likely without assistance.

Security, resource availability, and disaster recovery will again be a priority in the year ahead. It is a goal to provide continuing services to synod workers by making available virtual resources that can be accessed from any computer or device. This will also require even better security of portable computing equipment (laptops, tablets, and phones). In addition, a comprehensive Security Awareness program will be launched to ensure that all synod workers understand the importance of protecting synod data and a better awareness of some of the tactics hackers use.

Plans are underway for a WELS Education, Technology, and Leadership Summit in 2019 to be held at the Kalahari Resort in Wisconsin Dells, Wis. The date of the summit will be June 25-27 and include keynotes and workshops focuses on those three disciplines. The summit is a joint effort between WELS Technology and the Lutheran Schools office. To learn more visit <http://www.welsedtechlead.com>.



The WELS Technology team looks forward to opportunities for service. As God has allowed new technologies available for our use, we strive to be good stewards of them and enable our synod's ministries to use them to spread the precious news of Jesus Christ death and resurrection. To Him be the glory.

Respectfully submitted,

Martin Spriggs
WELS Chief Technology Officer