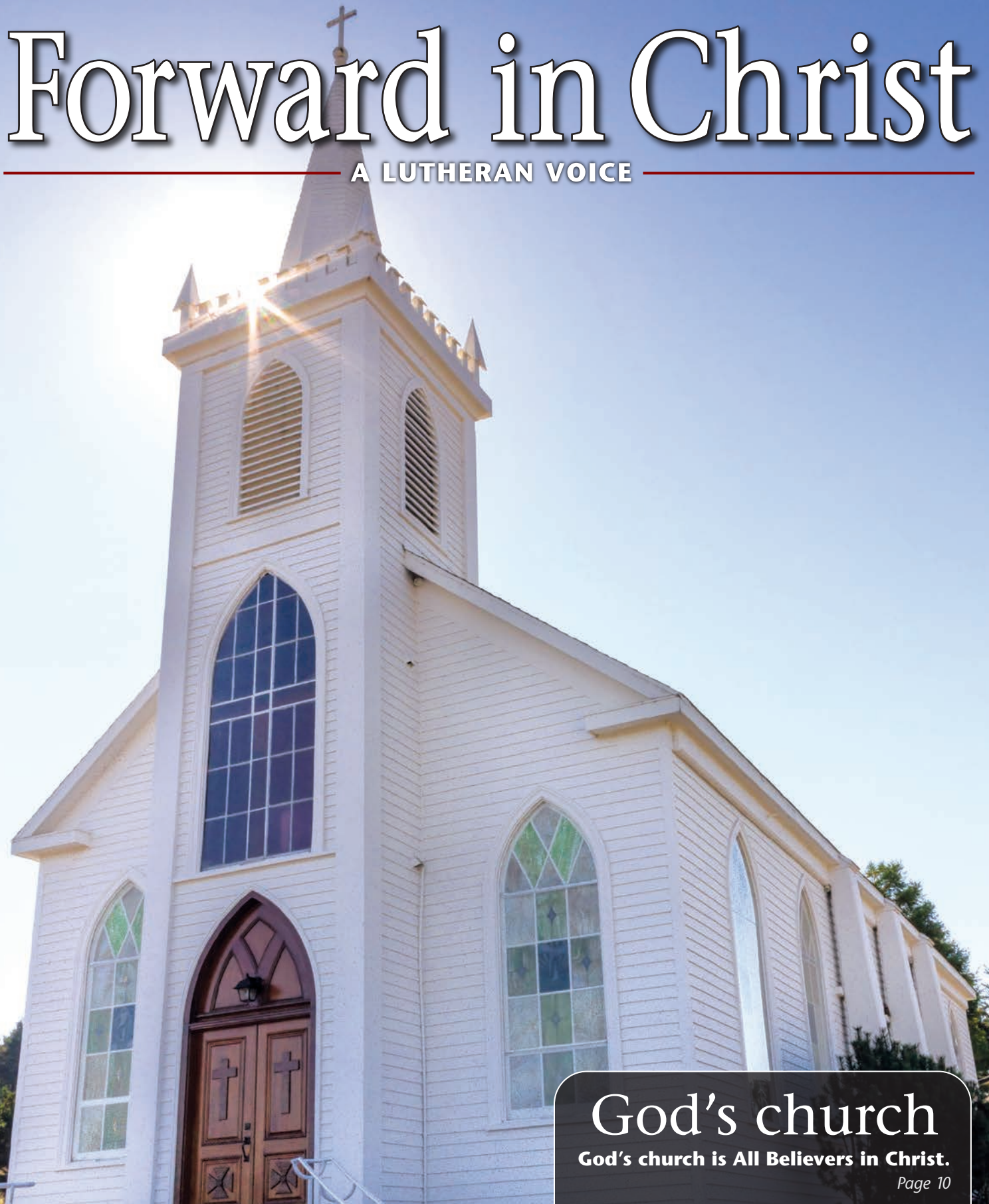


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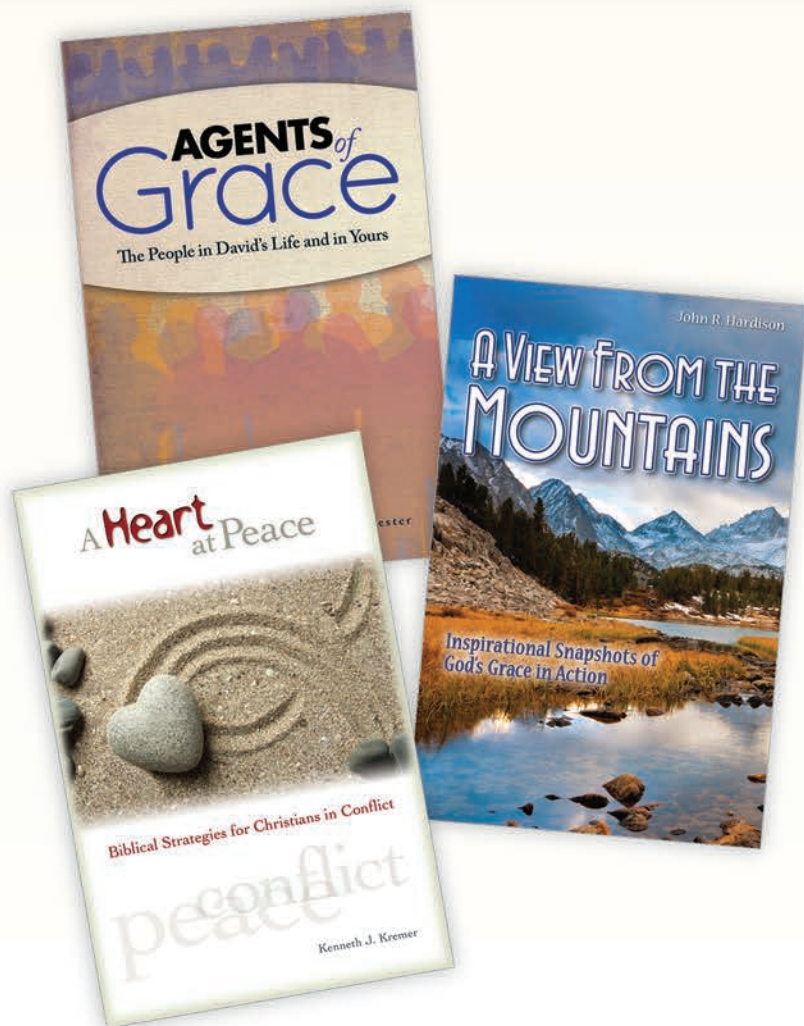


God's church

God's church is All Believers in Christ.

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GRACE *and* PEACE in the NEW YEAR




AGENTS OF GRACE

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Indicates additional online content

*May the LORD our God be with us as he was with our fathers;
may he never leave us nor forsake us. — 1 KINGS 8:57*

WHAT'S INSIDE

With this new year, we're excited to share a few new series with you.

- **Heart to heart: Parent conversations.** Designed to have the feel of a conversation between parents, this new column will feature a diverse group of parents discussing a different topic each month. This month's topic is how families are adjusting to life in the digital age (p. 16). Additional online content, including introductions to our column writers and longer versions of their printed articles, will be available at www.wels.net/forwardinchrist. This column is meant to be interactive, so send in your thoughts and stories.
- **Mission stories.** This new series will highlight how God is blessing the work of WELS World Missions. Each month we will focus on a particular mission field and introduce you to one of its national workers or members. In this issue, you meet Faidal Kubala Beza, a national pastor from the Lutheran Church of Central Africa—Malawi, and learn what it is like serving as a minister in Africa (p. 27). We're excited to introduce you to some of your brothers and sisters in Christ around the world. Keep them in your prayers.
- **God's church.** We are continuing to bring you articles to explain various biblical doctrines. This month, we're starting a four-part series on the holy Christian church (p. 10). Don't miss it.

Julie Wietzke



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A NEW EARTH

Just read your article “Light for our path” [Nov. 2014]. Your article left me with the impression that there will be heaven on a “new” earth, after judgment day. Is that to say that it will be the same orb that we now live in? I’ve never envisioned that and would like to make sure that my thinking is on track. I’ve always believed that heaven (pre- and post-judgment) will be in a new heavenly realm. I know that when I die my soul will go immediately to heaven with Jesus and that my soul will be reunited with my body (in heaven) after judgment day.

Online question

Prof. James Pope replies: The Bible states that “the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. . . . That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness” (2 Peter 3:10-13). It is clear from this passage and others (Isaiah 65:17; 66:22; Revelation 21:1) that on the Last Day this present world will pass away (Luke 21:33) and God will prepare “a new heaven and a new earth” for his people.

The question that remains for us is whether God will (1) annihilate this present world and create another one or (2) destroy this world without annihilating it and transform our present world into another one. Total annihilation or transformation/renovation: Those are the legitimate options for understanding what the Bible says will take place on the Last Day.

In the end—literally—it will not matter what specific course of action God takes. The result will be a new, perfect world in which we will live with our glorified bodies (1 Corinthians 15:35-57).

How wonderful it is for us to know that whenever our lives on this earth do come to an end, we will be with the

Lord forever. You and I have that confidence because salvation—from beginning to end—is God’s doing. It is his gift received through Spirit-worked faith.

A LOOK BACK

Re: “A look back” [Nov. 2014]. Thank you for this article that reminds us to look forward to the great things God continues to do as his Word is shared. We Christians, watching and waiting, have lots of work to do!

Lois Tackebury

COMMUNITY CELEBRATIONS

Re: “Whatever happened to mission festivals?” [Sept. 2014]. I grew up in a rural community in the ’30s. I too have fond memories of mission festival Sunday, considered to be very important. There was an afternoon service with a chicken dinner served by the ladies of the congregation (mostly farmers) at noon. Most—if not all—food was donated. If my memory serves me correctly, I believe my present congregation discontinued the extra afternoon service in the early ’50s due to poor attendance.

*Lorraine Nehls
Juneau, Wisconsin*

We of WELS are so blessed! Let me “boast” a bit about our joint Reformation service, held at St. Mark, Wallace, Mich. (I bet most folks don’t know where Wallace, Mich., is!)

We always have a joint service in the U.P., but somehow these last several years have seen an upswing in attendance. . . . Granted—all in all—“we” only numbered about 80 souls, but the joy of singing the battle hymn of the Reformation, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” resounded to our Lord with the same enthusiasm as when I used to sing with hundreds of WELS Lutherans at the arena and/or PAC of Milwaukee.

I thought, *Let the synod and fellow Lutherans know how content we are up here in Da U.P. and Northern Wisconsin.*


We persistently pray for new members and for the return of wandering sheep,

for our teens to stay in the Word. But we also strive to stay upbeat with our church membership where it stands now! We are reminded “where two or three” are gathered together, and we rejoice in our fellowship on days like Reformation Day.

As a former pastor of ours up here at Grace, Powers, Mich., said, “We are small, but mighty.” God is good!

*Gail Maxwell
Powers, Michigan*

Send your letters to **Feedback**, *Forward in Christ*, N16 W23377 Stone Ridge Dr, Waukesha WI 53188; fic@wels.net. Letters between 100 and 200 words are preferred. Include full name and address. Letters are edited for clarity, conciseness, and relevance. Not all letters received can be acknowledged or used. Writers’ views are not necessarily those of WELS or *Forward in Christ*.



heart to heart
parent conversations

We want to hear from you! Let us know your thoughts on this month’s topic of how families are adjusting to life in the digital age (p. 16).

Or perhaps you have something to say about next month’s topic: parenting mistakes. We’ve all had that moment when we’ve thought, “I can’t believe I . . .” Let us know about your parenting blunders and what you learned from those experiences.

You can join the conversation by visiting www.wels.net/forwardinchrist and looking for the link to the Heart to heart site. Or send mail to fic@wels.net or *Forward in Christ*, N16W23377 Stone Ridge Dr, Waukesha WI 53188.

Looking back, looking ahead

Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. Philippians 3:13,14

Steven J. Pagels

You probably don't need me to tell you that a new year will begin on January 1, but you might not know how the first month of our year got its name. We can thank the ancient Romans for giving us January, which they named after Janus, the god of gates and doorways. Because Janus was also known as the god of transitions, he is usually pictured as a man with two faces pointing in opposite directions.

There is nothing wrong with setting goals . . . as long as Christians remember that we are striving for something much greater.

Even though the apostle Paul was a Roman citizen, he didn't believe in any of the gods and goddesses of Roman mythology. He put his trust in the one true God. But from his prison cell, Paul found himself in a similar position to Janus—looking back and looking ahead.

FORGETTING THE PAST

Paul's time in prison had given him plenty of time to think. What do you think he thought about? All the hearts he had touched with the gospel? All the people who still needed to be reached with the gospel? His brothers and sisters in Christ who were being persecuted because of their faith? The many Christians he persecuted before Jesus brought him to faith?

I wouldn't be surprised if Paul was troubled by the sins of his past, because I



am too. When I look back at the last 12 months, I don't like what I see. I see too many missed opportunities. I see myself giving in to the same temptations. I see all the evil I have done and all the good I have failed to do. I want to do better, but I don't. I resolve to try harder, but I still fall short. My guilty conscience constantly reminds me that I am a sinner.

It is difficult for sinful human beings to forget about the past. It is impossible for us to get rid of our guilt by ourselves, but we don't have to because our Savior already has. He doesn't hold our sins over us. God has forgiven all our sins, and when God forgives, he forgets. That helps us forget too.

ANTICIPATING THE FUTURE

Paul turned his focus on the future, but not on the day he would eventually be released from prison or on everything he planned to do after he was set free. Paul wasn't looking ahead as much as he was looking up: "Straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to

win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."

There is nothing wrong with setting goals—personal, professional or self-improvement—as long as Christians remember that we are striving for something much greater. We look forward to the day when we will reach the ultimate goal. We anticipate the day when the Lord will give us the ultimate prize.

Because of what Jesus did for us on Good Friday, we can't wait for him to return on the Last Day. Because Jesus rose from the dead, we look forward to the day when we will also rise and see him coming down from the clouds. He will take us by the hand and take us to heaven, and we will be with the Lord forever. It will be a great day, a glorious day, a day we will never forget.

Contributing editor Steven Pagels is pastor at St. Matthew, Oconomowoc, Wisconsin.



Mark Schweden

Each day is another
day in the time
of grace that God
has shown us—
a time to celebrate
with joy all that
he has done for
sinners like us.

What's to celebrate?

"Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning" (Lamentations 3:22,23).

Once again this year, the crowds will gather in Times Square to count down the seconds until the ball drops and the new year begins. The scene will be duplicated around the world in different ways, from the large boisterous crowds gathered in city centers to the smaller parties of revelers meeting in homes or restaurants.

Watching those annual celebrations brings a touch of mild amusement and sadness at the same time. What exactly are these people celebrating? Are they congratulating themselves for "surviving" another year, as if they themselves had something to do with the fact that they are still living and breathing? Are they foolishly convinced that their lives will be significantly different on Jan. 1 and during the months ahead than they were only a day before on Dec. 31? Do they really think that the mere changing of the page of the calendar will give them the strength and resolve to be better people? It's amusing when you think of the amazing ability of people to deceive themselves. And it's sad to know that these people, so optimistic and happy and ready to celebrate on New Year's Eve, will wake up to the same empty and joyless lives on New Year's Day.

We can thank God that our celebration of a new year can be different. Rather than thinking that Jan. 1 and the days that follow will bring sudden changes to our lives, we enter the new year knowing that the days to come will be much the same as the days past. We will mark another birthday or another anniversary, but the days will not change dramatically.

On each day of the new year, just as he did every day of the past year, God will continue to give sinners like us the opportunity to confess our utter

sinfulness. Every day will be a day to acknowledge that it is because of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed. This year, just as in the year concluded, a gracious God will give us the opportunity to return daily to the foot of the cross to be assured that God's mercies in Christ are new every morning. Each day is another day in the time of grace that God has shown us—a time to celebrate with joy all that he has done for sinners like us.

We don't only celebrate God's mercy in his forgiveness that is new every day. We also celebrate that, because of that same mercy, each day of the coming year will be another gift of God in which to hear and cherish his Word that is preached in our churches and read in our homes. Every day will be another opportunity to serve and thank him. Each day will be another day for us to love and honor our spouses; to care for and teach our children; to honor and obey our parents; to serve others in our Christian vocations; to show love and compassion to those in need; and to share the good news of a Savior with people who have no reason to celebrate, not just in our personal encounters but also through missions around the world.

In that way, the new year will not really be new. It will be more of the same. But for those who know the mercy of God and who know their Savior, that is every reason to celebrate.

Light for our path

My boyfriend and I are both WELS, but we rarely talk about our faith or religious topics, and when we do, it's extremely awkward. How can I incorporate faith and the Bible into my relationship?

James F. Pope

I commend you for desiring to have a relationship in which your shared faith is prominent and open. Let's see what might lead to bringing that about.

BE ON THE LOOKOUT

For starters, I hope you have talked to your boyfriend about wanting a deeper spiritual relationship with him. He is the one who really needs to know what is important to you and how concerned you are by this void in your relationship.

As you talk with your boyfriend, be on the lookout for ways in which you two can easily and naturally talk about the Christian faith. Do you worship together at the same church? If so, talk about what you heard in the sermon or the Scripture lessons. Do you live in different cities and worship at different churches? If that is the case, now you can really talk about what each of you heard in sermons and Scripture lessons. Are you two attending Bible classes—together or separately in different locations—that can provide conversational topics? Are there items from your personal Bible reading that you can share with your boyfriend, insights you have gleaned or items you have wondered about?

All my questions have Colossians 3:16 in mind: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God." God's desire is that his Word permeates the lives of his children. That certainly includes couples like you who are dating, those who are single, married couples, families, and Christians in general. Be on the lookout for ways in which you can naturally and regularly talk to your boyfriend about the Bible and the Christian faith and then seize those opportunities.

One of the best ways you can talk to your boyfriend about the Bible and the Christian faith is by reading and discussing God's Word together. Where do you begin? Try reading one of the gospels together and discuss what Jesus said and did during his earthly life and ministry. Maybe you would benefit from reading a devotional book or commentary in connection with your Bible reading. Ask your pastor for suggestions if you are interested in books in these areas.

As you read the Bible together and discuss it, see if your conversations with each other don't turn into conversations with God. Pray for and with each other. Prayer books can alleviate any uncomfortableness that your boyfriend might have if he is not used to praying aloud. In time, you both may find it very comfortable to pray for and with each other with your own words.

BE AN EXAMPLE

Through your words and actions, you can be an example to your boyfriend and others in your circle of friends and family in how your conversation is "always full of grace, seasoned with salt" (Colossians 4:6). Who knows what may result from your example of expressing the Christian faith in your everyday conversations. You may wind up positively influencing not only your boyfriend but others as well! God bless your efforts.

Contributing editor James Pope, professor at Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minnesota, is a member at St. John, New Ulm.

James Pope also answers questions online at www.wels.net/what-we-believe/questions-answers. Submit your questions there or to fic@wels.net.

Your word
is a lamp
to my feet
and a light
for my path.

Psalm 119:105



GOD'S CHURCH

BUILT BY THE LORD AND BELONGING TO HIM

Richard E. Lauersdorf

When the Bible speaks about the church, it refers to people like me. But I'm not the only one. There are many, many more like me. Young and old; rich and poor; past, present, and future; Lutheran, Baptist, Catholic—they all make up God's church.

WHO BELONGS TO GOD'S CHURCH?

Who are these people? The word *church* tells me. In the original Greek it means "called out." God's church is composed of all whom he has called out of unbelief to faith. That's how Peter described it: "You are . . . a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9).

This church belongs to God. In his marvelous grace he calls people to faith—not just generic faith that trusts in almost anything, but specific faith. Though some would claim that it makes no difference what you believe, the Lord speaks otherwise. Very specifically Jesus says, "I am the way. . . . No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Very clearly Peter proclaimed, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). The answer is plain—only those in whose hearts God's grace has worked faith in Jesus as their Savior belong to his church.

If we want an easy way to remember this important truth, we need only remember ABC. God's church is composed of All Believers in Christ.

The family of God is another picture Scripture uses for God's church. Paul writes, "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ

Jesus" (Galatians 3:26). God is our heavenly Father, and believers are his dear children. What a warm, comforting picture. We have a Father whose love is out of this world. We belong to a family that includes our loving brother Jesus and more brothers and sisters than we can even imagine. And all because his grace has numbered us among the ABCs.

Are we sure of this blessed truth? How can we know that we are members of God's church? For the answer, it's best to look more at God's heart than at our own. In his Word he has laid open his heart to us. What does he show us in his Word? "I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness," he assures us (Jeremiah 31:3). When we look into God's heart, it's love that we see, not just for the world, but also for us!

WHAT IS GOD'S CHURCH LIKE?

Only the Lord knows who belongs to his church. We can look into our own hearts but not into someone else's to see whether faith exists there. Only God can do that. Paul reminds us, "The Lord knows those who are his" (2 Timothy 2:19). Every time we say the words of the Apostles' Creed, we remind ourselves of this truth. We don't say, "I see," but rather, "I believe in . . . the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints." Though Scripture does not use the term *invisible*, the concept is there. We can see who belongs to earthly churches and denominations, but only God can see who the ABCs truly are.

Moreover, his church is *one*. In the world today there are almost more denominations than we can count. Lutheran, Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Nondenominational, and others swirl around us. But God's church is one. There is only one body of believers in Christ. "One flock and one shepherd," Jesus says in John 10:16. "You are all one in Christ Jesus," Paul reminds us (Galatians 3:28). Though denominations may serve a useful pur-

pose and though we need to be careful which we join, we need to remember that God's church is one.

Another adjective might give us pause. "I believe in . . . the *holy* Christian Church," we confess in the Apostles' Creed. What does that mean? Looking at myself, I can see more sin than holiness. The devil and I are engaged in a lifelong 15-rounder that often leaves me flattened on the canvas. The sinful world and my sinful heart don't mind ganging up on me with the devil. They know exactly where my weak spots are and punch away at them. Yet at the end of the day I can pray, "Forgive me, Lord, for thy dear Son the ill that I this day have done" (*Christian Worship* 592:1), and know it's true. And when the eternal day approaches, I can stand "faultless . . . before his throne" (CW 382:4). When God looks at us, he sees saints. The church is holy not because it does not sin but because it is clothed in the righteousness of Christ.

name" (Acts 10:43). God's church is truly catholic because it includes all believers of all times and all places.

Sometimes we wonder how long the church can withstand the buffeting it receives from ungodly foes. The *church militant* we call it, because it's under attack and constantly at war. While we wait for the return of the Captain of the church, we can grow weary and worry about the church's survival. Then we need to hear the Lord of the church tell us that his church is imperishable. "The gates of [hell] will not overcome it," he promises (Matthew 16:18). "[My sheep] shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand," he assures us (John 10:28). The church militant will endure and become the church triumphant when it stands in perfect peace at its Savior's side in heaven.

How come we are included in the ABCs? How come we can stand along with Adam and Eve, Abraham and Aaron, Moses and Elijah, Peter, James,

Only those in whose hearts God's grace has worked faith in Jesus as their Savior belong to his church.

The Nicene Creed describes the church as "one holy *Christian* and apostolic Church." The word *Christian* literally means "catholic." Now before we wrinkle our brows and think that word refers to a church body headquartered in Rome, we need to realize *catholic* really means "universal." Of course, God's church is universal. No one is excluded because of race, gender, or social standing. People I've been privileged to meet in mission fields in Africa, Colombia, Brazil, Puerto Rico, Mexico, and elsewhere are numbered in God's church. The apostle Peter told the Gentiles in the house of Cornelius, "All the prophets testify about [Jesus] that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his

and John in this select grouping? How come we'll be numbered in the great multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language before the eternal throne of the Lamb? There's only one answer. It's entirely the working of the Lord of the church. In his grace he "calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith" (Explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed).

Richard Lauersdorf is pastor at Good Shepherd, West Bend, Wisconsin.

This is the first article in a four-part series on the holy Christian church.



STEWARDSHIP

My management of God's gifts

Our lives are not aimless drifting but opportunities to serve God and others.

Jeffrey D. Enderle

He found himself adrift in the middle of the ocean. The depth of the water and the distance to the nearest patch of land could be only guesses. Waves crashed down on top of him as he hunkered down in a tiny life raft. Ravenous sharks surrounded him. Unknown enemies lurked farther in the distance. This was the desperate condition in which Louis Zamperini found himself in May of 1943.

After his plane crashed into the Pacific Ocean, Zamperini was fortunate just to be alive. Adrift in the middle of the ocean, it would have been very easy for this airman to give up. Facing overwhelming odds, he could have despaired at the scant resources at his disposal to prolong his life. His true life story is riveting for many reasons. Audiences are captivated by this man's struggle, getting a glimpse into how this remarkable hero was able to do what was necessary.

Christians can feel adrift in the middle of this crazy world too. We find ourselves struggling against the current of our culture. Ironically, we are at risk not because we have so little but because we have so much and are occupied with so many activities, responsibilities, and interests. With so much and such hectic schedules, we run the risk of our things and our schedules owning us.

God, however, has placed us where we are and has given us the opportunity to live for him. God opens our eyes to see that our lives are no accident. We have blessings and resources. Whatever we have been given, it is a trust from God. God also wants us to know he has bigger plans for us than simply to survive this life. He wants us to be fruitful branches connected to his Son, Jesus.

GOD PREPARES US

If you have read the story of Zamperini in the book *Unbroken* or have seen the movie, you know how the story ends. Even if you haven't, no spoiler alert is necessary to tell you that the saga on the life raft wasn't the only ordeal Zamperini had to endure. Even if you know how his story ends, you can't help being held in suspense as you take in the challenges and terrible tragedies of his life.

Actually, the narrative is expertly crafted to reveal how the early events of Zamperini's life shaped his character. His identity, the type of person he became, prepared him for handling conditions no human being would expect to survive. Even more than those past experiences, though, it was his outlook and focus that kept him going.

How has God prepared you for your life on a raft in a godless world? It can be easy for Christians to get discouraged when we look at what we must face here in life. Then we look at our meager resources and question how we can ever survive. Sometimes we even look at the amazing things other Christians are doing and start to feel inadequate.

But wait! God wants us to recall our identity whether we are feeling adrift amid all kinds of things in this life or assaulted by all sorts of activities. As baptized children of God, we already know our story ends in victory through Jesus Christ. God has made us his children and has promised not to abandon us. While we live here, he also encourages us to use our time, talents, and treasure for him. We know Jesus and his power. He reminds us, “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). Jesus satisfies our souls with his salvation. We are alive because of him.

Our outlook and focus come from him. “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Ephesians 5:1,2). Because Jesus has redeemed us, we have the privilege of living for him and serving his purposes. God doesn’t call us to do what everyone else does. God tells us, “We have different gifts, according to the grace given us” (Romans 12:6). Whatever gifts he has given us are tools he has placed in our tool belts to be used for his purposes.

USE WHAT GOD HAS GIVEN

Zamperini’s story is inspiring because his uncommon determination and perseverance led him to use whatever resources he had at his disposal. He only had a handful of tools on that life raft but managed them with skill and ingenuity. Attention and toughness allowed him to outlast physical and mental torture.

Packaged together with our calling to faith through the gospel, the Holy Spirit opens our eyes. He enlightens us to see so many amazing blessings bundled together with the gift of salvation. Our very lives and everything about us are gifts from God: “Therefore, I urge you . . . in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship” (Romans 12:1 NIV 2011).

Think of our gifts from God as more than our possessions. They don’t belong to us to store up and squirrel away. God calls us to faithfully manage his gifts. In the parable of the talents (Matthew

25:14-30), Jesus describes our use of God’s gifts more in terms of investing. Investing our gifts for God’s work and then allowing God to accomplish his results help remove our fear of failure. Faithful investing does not require us to figure out if we are the servants with one talent, five talents, or ten talents. God calls us simply to do our best. “Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Colossians 3:17). Then God allows us to channel our investments—our time, talents, and treasures—where we think they are needed. He will bless our efforts to bring about the maximum impacts in the lives of the people he has placed into our spheres of influence.

God helps us see the people and opportunities he places in our lives as investment opportunities for our gifts.

God enlightens our hearts to see our Christian identity and maintain a uniquely Christian outlook for life. Then God helps us see the people and opportunities he places in our lives as investment opportunities for our gifts. When we put those gifts to work, we don’t know what God will accomplish in return. We don’t know what will be the result of spending a quiet moment in prayer with a hurting sister or brother in the faith. We might never find out what will happen from sharing a warm meal with an empty-bellied stranger. We might never fully know what our offerings accomplish for the work of his church. But whatever gifts you’ve been given and however many you possess, God’s got pretty amazing stories planned for their results in his kingdom.

Jeffrey Enderle is pastor at Beautiful Saviour, Carlsbad, California.

This is the final article in a three-part series on stewardship.

A workout in the gym brought comfort to someone struggling to gain peace with God by his own works.

Brooks Reames

“Do more! Try harder! Strive for perfection!”

I am not sure how you feel when you read those words, but the first thing that comes to my mind is exhaustion and a major inability to be who I desperately want to be. We all feel the need not only to be better human beings but also to be better Christians. We feel this because the law of God has been written on our hearts. As Romans says, “They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts” (2:15). This truth really began to take hold of my heart back in 2011.

Before returning to Aiken, I had lived in Greenwood, South Carolina. I had received a baseball scholarship to Lander University in 2008 and lived there until 2011. Needless to say, Jesus radically opened my eyes while I was there. Late one night, when drugs and alcohol were the main attraction, I felt the weight of the law. I headed for church and was baptized on Nov. 21, 2008.

LIVING BY THE LAW

During the next three years in Greenwood, God did a magnificent work in my heart. He gave me a burning desire to know him more deeply, and I wanted to love him more effectively. But I had one big problem. My doctrine and my mind-set were all messed up. The focus of my Christian faith was all about my performance and not enough about Christ’s performance for me. I lived a very rocky Christian life. When I felt I was achieving obedience, I was happy. When I thought I was failing God, I was depressed.

After all the effort to achieve my salvation, I hit rock bottom in my faith. I finally came to a place where the law completely wrecked me. I was mad at God and turned my back to him. I can recall one day when I told God I was done following him and cursed him out. It seems absurd to curse at God, but I can say honestly that it was a great day in my life. I had finally given up on trying to obey the law. I had finally come to a place where I knew I could not do it. Little did I know that this was God’s intention for me. God wanted me to understand my inability to obey the law.

During the next couple of years, I rebelled. I gave up on following God. I knew that if being a Christian was about following rules, then I couldn’t

be one. I still had a distorted view of the Christian life.

Even though I was living as a rebel against God’s way, God had a beautiful plan for me. God was leading me to the true and right doctrine. During that time, God led me to the beautiful gospel of grace, but I struggled to find assurance in it. I needed someone else to “get it”—to confirm me in it. I felt as if I was the only person that was itching and needing the pure gospel message. I wanted—and desperately needed—someone to tell me the gospel was really true.

FINDING THE TRUE GOSPEL

My story takes me to the end of 2013 and about 60 miles from Greenwood, back to Aiken. It was during a fitness orientation at Gold’s Gym in Aiken, where I worked, that I met this tall, skinny guy named Jonathan Bourman, whom I now consider a great friend and my pastor. Little did I know at the time that this fitness orientation would be one that would lead me to understand the true doctrine.

Jonathan had recently moved to Aiken to plant a church. When he told me that, I remember rolling my eyes to the back of my head and thinking, *Aiken has enough law-filled churches.* But then we began to talk, and he said a word that struck a cord in my heart.

Confessions OF FAITH



He said, "GOSPEL!" The joy that sprang to my heart after hearing that word was indescribable. I later came to understand that this guy "gets it" and I needed to hear more from him.

After my first encounter with Jonathan, we began to meet on a weekly basis. He began teaching me the Lutheran doctrine. I was blown away with the purity of this truth. Each day Christianity became clearer to me. The gospel was the centerpiece in this doctrine. I began to see the true essence of my Savior. As time went by, I gained the assurance I was looking for, not from my own feelings of salvation but from God's Word and my baptism. What a beautiful gift God has given me in seeing his pure doctrine.

Today, I proudly call myself a confessional Lutheran and will forever live to be reminded of the gospel message and to bring this freedom to other people.

SURROUNDED BY GOD'S GRACE

I am extremely excited that Peace Lutheran Church started in Aiken. This church has become an important part of my life—and my wife's life too.

My wife. Two words I cannot believe I'm writing. Lauren and I graduated from high school together and reunited four years after graduation. The crazy part is that we may have had only one

conversation during our time at South Aiken High. We are newlyweds and blessed beyond our wildest dreams.

In my younger days, I was not involved in the church. But Lauren grew up going to church every Sunday. She was heavily involved in the youth programs and really sought to know the Lord. Yet during those early years in her life, she was in the same predicament that I was. Like me, Lauren was seeking to gain God's approval and love by her obedience. She had a misunderstanding of what Christianity was truly about. She left the gospel totally out of the picture.

The beautiful quality about Lauren is that she desires to love Jesus more and more. During her senior year at the University of South Carolina, that quality captured my attention. Despite our lack of friendship in high school, we began hanging out. Not long after reuniting, we began dating. We both lived to gain God's love by our lives of obedience. At that time we did not realize that we already possessed God's love in the gospel. Soon the Lord not only began opening my eyes to this truth, but also Lauren's.

Jesus loves us so much that he is constantly surrounding us with his grace. I can see the love of God in our lives because he is protecting our lives with



Brooks and Lauren Reames

the gospel. Peace Lutheran Church is one way that God is showing that protection and love. We are so thankful to be a part of what God is doing and going to do through Peace and are deeply grateful to have our faith grow in the gospel.

We both find comfort in the words of Jesus, "It is finished" (John 19:30).

Brooks Reames is a member at Peace, a new mission church in Aiken, South Carolina.



heart to heart parent conversations

Welcome to FIC's new parenting column, designed to be an honest forum for Christian parents to build one another up and support each other. As the column's title suggests, we want this to be a conversation. So please join in. Let us know how you've dealt with these topics in your family. Some readers may even have their contributions printed here.

In this debut article, three parents share how they deal with technology in their families. Have a thought you want to add? Join the conversation!



Join the conversation!

Visit www.wels.net/forwardinchrist and look for the Heart to heart link. Read uncut versions of the articles, learn more about the authors, and give us your thoughts and reactions.

HOW ARE TODAY'S FAMILIES ADJUSTING TO LIFE IN THE DIGITAL AGE?

I love connecting with my kids instantly via texting and Facebook. But I hate that texting and Facebook have replaced much of our family's face-to-face communication.

Here is a text exchange that I shared with my son Micah one day after school.

Micah: *Do you know where Ethan is? I am waiting for him in the parking lot.*

Me: *No. Can't you text him?*

Micah: *I don't have his cell phone number.*

Keep in mind:

1. My sons, Ethan and Micah, had been riding to high school together for two years.
2. They are brothers. They live in the same house.
3. During this exchange, I am at work—miles away from their school.

"Dad, you are totally awesome! By the way, where's Mom?"

"In the kitchen, bud."

"Mom, you look really pretty today. I like what you did with your hair."

It was nice to hear, even if my kid was totally insincere and only saying it because it was in the rules. Before you (correctly) jump to the conclusion that the Guenthers have weird rules, let me explain. . . .

We love our technology in the Guenther household. We realize what a blessing it is that we can connect with our relatives in the Lower 48 via Skype or FaceTime. Mom and Dad love their iPhones. The boys love their iPad. We all love the Wii. But sometimes we need to rein it in a bit.

"No iPhones at the dinner table." That was a rule the boys came up with. And it's a good one. It gives us a chance to

I'm glimpsing 50, so before digital, I have to talk analog. When 21-year-old Phil and 23-year-old Anna were little, I was certain TV would fry their brains.

They'll gleefully tell you how I monitored their screen time with a capitalist system I invented. I gave them quarters they could use to buy half-hours of TV. If they didn't watch, they got to keep the quarters. Not surprisingly, the system didn't last as long as the mockery of it has.

Even while I fretted over the frying of their brains, I never found a babysitter better than Walt Disney. Using screens as a babysitter has always been a no-no, and I sinned boldly. Little Anna and Philly watched those Disney videos over and over, singing and dancing along.

TV has since morphed into every manner of magical machine. My stepson, Sam (11), was born into this magical world and knows no other. Sam will play Madden 15 on

So what did I do? I texted Ethan: *Micah is waiting for you in the parking lot. Can you two PLEASE exchange cell phone numbers!?*

As I look back, I'm not sure whether to laugh or be a little bit horrified. A decade ago, Micah would have trudged back into school, found his brother, and expressed his impatience face-to-face. How technology has changed the way families communicate!

So how can families stay connected in this digital age? And how can we make time for the most important connection of all—our relationship with Christ? I won't pretend that our family always gets this right, but here are a few things we strive for.

1 Use technology to build one another up. We've sent many "I love you" and "I am praying for you" texts. We've also texted Scripture passages.

2 Don't use technology to tear one another down. Remember, "the tongue has the power of life and death" (Proverbs 18:21).

3 Don't let communication via technology take the place of personal, heartfelt communication. It is so important to share family meals, minus the distraction of electronic devices. Sharing the day's highs and lows at meals is a tradition we started when our boys were small. It provides a rich opportunity to pray about each family member's triumphs and struggles.

Our world is changing at lightning speed, and we may struggle to keep up. But we don't need to. Ultimately, there is only one thing needful, as Jesus gently reminded Martha (Luke 10:42). I think I'll text my kids that thought.

Ann Jahns lives in Germantown, Wisconsin, with her husband, Thad, and their three sons.



interact as a family, sharing our highs and lows of the day—with no interruptions.

We have some rules for the boys too. First, they have to limit their time on the iPad. Siri helps us out. "Siri, set a timer for 30 minutes," they tell her.

Even before they get to play, there are rules to keep. They have to complete all the tasks on the laminated page that sits on the iPad.

Is my homework done for tomorrow? Memory work too?

Is my bed made?

Are all of my chores done?

Have I played outside today?

Have I spent time with my brothers today?

Have I asked Mom or Dad if they need me to do anything for them?

Have I told Dad how awesome he is today?

Have I told Mom how pretty she is today?

If the answer is yes to all of these questions, then you don't need to ask permission to play the iPad. Just set a timer for 30 minutes and have fun! :)

Okay, so the last two are really just meant to be fun. But we do want our kids to learn to enjoy the blessings of technology without becoming slaves to it, to use God's gifts responsibly, and to maintain human contact and not get too absorbed in the games. And everything will be okay—the world probably won't come crashing down—if I ignore my phone for 45 minutes each night around the dinner table too.

Thank God for his gifts of technology—and for his forgiveness in Jesus for all the times that we've misused or abused them. May God help us to use these gifts responsibly.

Rob Guenther is a pastor in Kenai, Alaska. He and his wife, Becky, have four sons ages 10 and under.



his dad's tablet while listening to Bruno Mars on his iPod while following the Timberwolves' game on TV while texting someone on his phone.

But here's the thing. Despite the deluge of digital distraction, all three kids' brains remain unfried. Yes, they multitask in ways I can't fathom, but they still read and write intelligently. They exercise, play piano, and know how to cook pasta. I'm certain they'll find gainful employment—probably with digital media as part of their jobs.

I wish I hadn't been such an anxious parent with the older two. Turns out, they mostly grew up to be the people God made them.

That's not to say anything goes. We have the same rules you probably do. No screens at the table. Homework before games. Parental monitoring of websites and TV shows. And every once in a while, an enforced quiet time—

no screens, no music, just people in a room together, listening to their own thoughts or engaging in conversation.

I guess parenting in the digital world is the same as in every other world, isn't it? We pray for our kids, knowing our heavenly Father loves them even more than we do. We explain how rules—ours, God's—are for their protection. We let them make their own choices and watch quietly if they have to suffer the consequences. We talk, talk, talk about everything. We forgive them, and they forgive us. We feed them, hug them, tuck them in.

And late at night, we grab our devices and push the buttons: "Love you, kiddo." Sometimes they're up too, and they text their love right back.

Laurie Gauger-Hested and her husband, Michael, have a blended family that includes her two 20-somethings and his preteen son.



When the news is bad

Jesus is always the answer during hard times—for us and for those we see as invincible, full-of-life college students.

Glenn L. Schwanke

Students are beginning to gather before one of our mid-week campus ministry Bible studies when Mary nonchalantly checks her text messages. I think nothing of it, until I notice Mary staring hard at her cell phone's screen. The tears start to roll down her cheeks. She looks up with eyes that betray a broken heart. She blurts out, "My uncle just died in a car accident!"

It's after worship and fellowship time at church. I notice that Jon is hanging around, waiting for others to leave. Finally, after everyone else has left, Jon walks up to me. "Pastor, do you have a minute? I need to talk." I respond, "Sure." I invite Jon into my office. He takes a seat. The words start tumbling out, as Jon confesses a sin that has tripped him up yet again. He feels so dirty. His guilt is crushing him.

The church phone rings. It's Cindy. She'd like to make an appointment to see me, so we schedule it for the next day. When Cindy comes in, I can tell that she hasn't been sleeping well. Cindy just learned that her mother is dying. What complicates matters is that Cindy and her mother haven't spoken in years—not since her parents were divorced. And even worse than that? Cindy knows that her mom hasn't gone to church in a long time.

Those of us with gray hair and wrinkles may dream that college-age students are invincible.

After all, they are so full of energy! So confident! So ready with expert answers on every subject under the sun—from politics, economics, the environment, ethics, and philosophy to pop culture and video games like Minecraft and NBA 2K14.

Death and dying? That's nowhere on the radar screen. Failure? That's not in their vocabulary. Until the phone rings. Until the doctor looks over the clipboard and says, "It's cancer." Until the morning brings haunting memories of the night before.

What do we say to invincible, full-of-life college students when the news is bad? When their eyes are dull, their cheeks are stained with tears, and their hearts are broken? We say what countless generations of Christians before us have said: "Jesus."

When death stares up at us from the casket of a Christian grandparent, mom or dad, or very best friend, there is Jesus who guarantees, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die" (John 11:25,26).

When we run all the stoplights of God's law and careen off the cliff into sin and self-destruction only to be left a spiritual wreck, there is Jesus who says, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32). Jesus did not push away the sinful woman who anointed his feet with oil. Rather, he assured her, "Your sins are forgiven" (Luke 7:48). There is forgiveness for you too. Come and kneel at the rail. Take and eat. Take and drink. Leave the crushing weight of your sin on the shoulders of your Savior who carried it to Golgotha.

And what about Cindy, whose mom is dying? I suggested that Cindy write her mom a note to express her love. And I promised to contact the WELS pastor in her mom's town, asking him to call on her. He has.

When the news is bad, there is good news. There is Jesus.

Glenn Schwanke, pastor at Peace, Houghton, Michigan, serves as campus pastor at Michigan Technological University.



CHANGES IN MINISTRY

Pastors

Buch, Donald R., to retirement

Guthmiller, Mark R., to retirement

Rosenberg, Mark, to Trinity, Morenci, Mich.

Schmidt, Daniel J., to Risen Savior, Austin, Tex.

Westendorf, Thomas B., to retirement

Teachers

Lueneburg, Susan A., to St. Mark's, Watertown, Wis.

Solofra, Nate, to Northland Lutheran High School, Mosinee, Wis.

SYNOD CONVENTION

The 63rd biennial convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod will be held July 27–30 at Michigan Lutheran Seminary, Saginaw, Mich. The convention delegate fee, usually paid by the congregation the delegate represents, is \$250. The deadline for submitting memorials to be printed in the *Book of Reports and Memorials* is Jan. 15. Memorials submitted after Jan. 15 and approved for convention consideration will be posted on the convention website, www.wels.net/2015synodconvention, if they are received by June 1. Further directions can be found at www.wels.net/2015synodconvention. Send memorials to President's Office, N16W23377 Stone Ridge Dr, Waukesha WI 53188; carla.martin@wels.net.

NOTICE FOR CONGREGATION TREASURERS AND PASTORS

We thank God for you and for your support of the ministry WELS carries out on behalf of all congregations. We ask that you continue to mail your Congregation Mission Offering (CMO) deposit and its processing coupon to our bank lock box, which provides effective and efficient deposit processing for the synod. The last business day of each month is the reporting cutoff date for the CMO deposit. For the deposit to be included in reported receipts for the month, CMO must be received in the synod's bank lock box on or before the last business day. An exception is made for December offerings. Gifts received by the bank lock box up to and including Jan. 8 will be credited as 2014 CMO, if accompanied by a 2014 coupon. Thank you for your assistance.

ANNIVERSARIES

Appleton, Wis.—Mount Olive (100). Jan. 25. Worship, 8 and 10:30 A.M. May 17. Worship, 8, 9:30, and 11 A.M.; meal to follow. Oct. 11. Worship, 8 and 10:30 A.M. Website, www.mountoliveappleton.com.

Garden Grove, Calif.—King of Kings School (50). May 9. Worship, 11 A.M.; meal to follow. office@kingofkingsgg.org.

COMING EVENTS

Marriage enrichment—WELS Adult Discipleship holds marriage enrichment weekends around the country. See a list of upcoming retreats at www.wels.net/events.

Kingdom Workers national convention—Jan. 9–11. Scottsdale, Ariz. Website, www.christlead.com.

Mission and Ministry—Feb. 3–5. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis. Theme: "Should I not be concerned about that great city?" (Jonah 4:11). WELS Home Missions, Ministry Support, and World Missions share information and resources. Jason Williams, williamj@wls.wels.net. Website, www.wls.wels.net.

Pathways to Christ (Ladies) retreat—Mar. 13–15. Hawthorn Inn, Oshkosh, Wis. Theme: Psalm 46:10. 920-233-1069. Website, www.martinlutheroshosh.com.

WELS Nurses Association spring conference—Mar. 20–21. WELS Center for Mission and Ministry, Waukesha, Wis. Theme: "The heart of healthcare—the heart of WELS." Website, www.welsnurses.net.

Christian Woman Today retreat—Mar. 20–22. Theme: "Be filled with the Spirit" (Ephesians 5:18). Maureen, 262-784-0412. Website, www.christianwomantoday.org.

Tour to Germany—May 24–June 4. Hosted by Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis. Registration deadline, Feb. 10. Website, www.wls.wels.net/seminary/2015-germany-tour.

New England tour—June 20–30. All WELS members are invited to join the Martin Luther College Alumni Association's tour to New England. Steve Balza, 507-217-1731. Website, www.mlc-wels.edu/go/alumni-tour.

WELS National School Leadership conference—June 15–18. Hosted by WELS Commission on Lutheran Schools. Country Springs Hotel, Waukesha, Wis. Website, www.wels.net/events.

WELSTech conference—July 9–11. For those interested in learning how technology can aid the ministry efforts of churches, schools, individuals, and other gospel-sharing organizations. Hosted by WELS Technology office. Country Springs Hotel, Waukesha, Wis. Website, www.wels.net/events.

NAMES WANTED

New Ulm, Minn.—Dr. Martin Luther High School's class of 1965 will be celebrating its 50th anniversary next sum-

mer. Send names of interested parties to bpamperin@sbcglobal.net; 262-255-0875.

Merced, Calif.—Contacts in the Merced area to invite to a new Bible study. pastor.cortright@gmail.com.

Palm Springs, Calif. area—Looking for WELS friends and family wintering in the southern California communities of Corona, Riverside, and Yucaipa. Steve Koelpin, 909-810-1045; pastorsteve@crownoflifechurch.net. Website, www.crownoflifechurch.net.

Visual artists—To participate in Art-A-Whirl 2015 from May 15–17 at St. John, Minneapolis, Minn. Art-A-Whirl is the nation's largest open studio tour. St. John is currently recruiting WELS/ELS artists as it participates in Art-A-Whirl by turning the church location into an artist's studio for that weekend. Registration deadline: Feb. 1. Contact Kai Grohs with electronic samples of work at kisakg@gmail.com or call 612-270-1619.

Military—Congregation members, family, or friends who serve in the Armed Forces and desire spiritual services. Complete an online referral form at www.wels.net/military. Include as much information as possible; e-mail addresses are especially important. Special Ministries, 414-256-3241; csn@wels.net.

VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

Join Kingdom Workers' Faith In Action to support the ministries of congregations throughout the United States and Canada in 2015. Help reach out to communities, teach at vacation Bible schools, and proclaim the gospel. Volunteer opportunities include canvassing, sports camps, VBS, and more. See the full list at www.kingdomworkers.com/opportunities.

HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS WANTED

In an effort to reclaim storage space, church leaders often discard documents, not realizing that they tell the story of God's grace in the congregation and the synod. If you have items related to the history of your congregation, even bulletins from special services, forward them to the synod archives, which are housed on the seminary campus. Send documents to WELS Archives, 11831 N Seminary Dr, Mequon WI 53092.

To place an announcement, call 414-256-3210; bulletinboard@wels.net. Deadline is eight weeks before publication date.

Upcoming conference opportunities

Two national conferences being held this summer will allow WELS members to hone their skills and grow their knowledge in the areas of school leadership and technology.

The WELS National School Leadership Conference, will be held June 15–18 at the Country Springs Hotel, Waukesha, Wis. Its theme “Soul, Mind, Body—Sanctified through and through” is based on 1 Thessalonians 5:23: “May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

“We believe a balanced life results in effective ministry and leadership,” says Shawn Herkstroeter, principal at Faith, Fond du Lac, Wis., and conference co-chair. “Balance begins with the health of our soul, mind, and body. This conference is designed to help participants reflect and improve upon their spiritual, mental, and physical well-being.”

Conference worship, devotions, keynote speakers, and sectionals will center on that theme, with workshops offering learning opportunities in six different areas: classroom instruction, personal health and wellness, early childhood education, urban education, general leadership, and educational technology. A pre-conference on June 15 will highlight school-based outreach, technology in the classroom, and sensory and brain development for early childhood ministry.

There will also be time for networking and fellowship with other WELS educators. “Forming and developing these partnerships will mutually benefit our schools, but more important strengthen the WELS school system,” says Herkstroeter.

All WELS teachers—from early childhood to college, in WELS schools as well as public schools—are invited to attend. “Whether you are a fourth-grade teacher serving in a WELS school in Texas, a teacher in the public school

system in Minnesota, a WELS high school teacher serving in Washington, or a WELS principal serving in Wisconsin, we consider you a Christian leader for the next generation,” says Ryan Hill, principal at Abiding Word, Houston, Texas, and conference co-chair.

Registration opens in February. Learn more at www.wels.net/events.

The second conference, WELSTech Conference 2015, will highlight where technology meets ministry. “Ministry comes first, but then where does technology fit in?” says Martin Spriggs, WELS chief technology officer and conference chair. “The focus of this conference will be all those intersections. What is the ministry, and what are the possibilities of how technology might be able to respond to some of those needs.”

Held July 9–11 also at the Country Springs Hotel, the conference will include practical sessions with real-world applications on topics such as the effective use of social networks, worship technologies, introducing tablets and Chromebooks in the classroom, and website building. Some sessions will be more theoretical, “where we’ll do a little more brainstorming of what the possibilities are around a technology,” says Spriggs.

Spriggs says the conference will offer learning and fellowship opportunities for pastors, teachers, and laypeople interested in technology. While Spriggs’ weekly technology podcast, <http://welstech.wels.net>, offers ongoing education and discussion, “I’m excited to bring people together like this to have conversations in a more focused setting,” says Spriggs. “I’m looking forward to what networking can be done and what ideas will come out of this conference and what ministry can be accomplished after the conference through technology.”

Registration opens in February. Learn more at www.wels.net/welstechconf.

Obituaries

Elizabeth R. Baumann 1951–2014

Elizabeth (née Fuhrmann) Baumann was born July 2, 1951, in Ypsilanti, Mich. She died Oct. 16, 2014.

A 1973 graduate of Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn., she taught at Friedens, Kenosha, Wis., and Grace, Geneva, Neb.

She is preceded in death by her husband, Paul, and her father. She is survived by three sons, two daughters, two grandchildren, her mother, and four brothers.

Harry William Marks Jr. 1934–2014

Harry Marks was born Mar. 23, 1934, in Moorhead, Minn. He died Nov. 6, 2014.

Marks became a WELS pastor through a colloquy. He served at St. Paul, North Hollywood, Calif., and Faith, Anderson, Calif.

He is survived by his wife, Shirley; 1 son; 3 daughters; 12 grandchildren; 5 great-grandchildren; and 1 sister.

Reginald A. Siegler 1912–2014

Reginald Siegler was born May 17, 1912, in Bangor, Wis. He died Nov. 7, 2014, in La Crosse, Wis.

A 1937 graduate of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis., he served at Michigan Lutheran Seminary, Saginaw, Mich.; Friedens, Kenosha Wis.; Eastside, Madison, Wis.; St John, Rock Springs, Wis.; and St. Paul, Bangor, Wis.

He is preceded in death by his first wife, Virginia; his second wife, Hildgard; two sons; and two brothers. He is survived by 1 son, 1 daughter, 15 grandchildren, and 24 great-grandchildren.

Supporting new teachers so they thrive

NTI sounds like a dramatic TV crime show, but for 105 first- and second-year teachers in ten WELS districts, the New Teacher Induction program is a life saver.

“New teachers, even the brightest, meet unexpected challenges in their early years of teaching. For a long time, education has left new teachers to sink or swim. NTI is aimed at supporting new teachers so they thrive,” says Jon Schaefer, director of the NTI program.

Begun in 2009 as a pilot program, NTI was a joint effort of the Commission for Lutheran Schools and Martin Luther College (MLC), New Ulm, Minn., to provide mentoring and support to new teachers; the program is now under the direction of Schaefer at MLC.

Schaefer is quick to highlight NTI's benefits: “Teacher induction improves classroom management,” he says. “NTI can enhance teacher retention and provide principals with the support of a trained instructional mentor. Mentors also take new ideas and practices back to their own classrooms.”

More than 50 2014 MLC graduates are working with a trained mentor, including Abigail Kurth, who teaches grades 2-3 at New Hope Lutheran Academy, West Melbourne, Fla. “Being a first-year teacher is very busy. I have made so many changes to my classroom—everything from physical layout to management strategies to instructional procedures,” she says. “My mentor has been a big help as I make these changes.”

Jon Kulhanek, another member of MLC's class of 2014, was assigned to grades 5-6 at Bay Pines, Seminole, Fla. “Getting a call to Florida was the last thing I expected,” he says. “My mentor helped by not only discussing classroom and teaching suggestions, but also how to survive in a completely new setting. It is such a blessing to have an experienced colleague in the ministry who is a phone call away.”

At the start, Kulhanek had mixed feelings about being involved in the NTI program. “To me, it seemed like it was an extension of student teaching evaluations. However, I am so thankful this program exists. My mentor and I see each other as equals working in God's ministry. I don't feel like I'm getting graded or being watched, but instead I have a peer with years of experience who is willing to give me advice and encouragement to aid me in the first years of my ministry.”



Jon Kulhanek, 2014 MLC graduate and teacher at Bay Pines, Seminole, Fla., is gaining extra support in his first year of teaching through the New Teacher Induction program.

Jeff Loberger, principal at Christ the King, Palm Coast, Fla., serves as both Kurth's and Kulhanek's mentor. He communicates with them on a weekly basis and observes classroom instruction quarterly.

Loberger became a mentor two years ago because he has “a passion for teachers and the work they do.” As he builds a trust relationship with his mentees and helps them set goals, he says the program also benefits him as he discovers “innovative ideas” for the

new teachers and sometimes *from* the new teachers. “It brings about a servant-heart attitude that helps me to realize that the kingdom we serve is larger than just the one congregation in which we have been called,” he says.

Principals are also happy with the program. Kurth's principal, Benjamin Priebe, says, “I view Abby's mentor as an additional member of our staff. His words of encouragement, his willingness to assist, and his love for the ministry here in the South Atlantic District have a positive influence on our first-year teacher.”

Priebe continues, “The NTI program has a trickle-down effect for all involved in ministry of a Lutheran elementary school. The students benefit from having a first-year teacher who has direct access to a teacher who has experienced some of the challenges that are associated with being a first-year teacher. Our ministry at large will greatly benefit . . . not only in the here and now, but for many school years to come.”

Schaefer says a future goal for the program is to “foster a collaborative culture and teacher leadership. Teaching is a life-long process that begins from the first day a teacher walks into class at MLC through induction and beyond. Being mentored during the first two years of ministry allows new teachers to value feedback and the opportunity to learn alongside experienced colleagues who share a sense of responsibility and accountability for the learning of all students. These are blessings that could benefit all teachers.”

NTI continues to need experienced teachers—either retired or still teaching—to serve as mentors. For more information, contact Professor Jon Schaefer at schaeffj@mlc-wels.edu.

Ann Ponath



New program helps congregations analyze ministry

Beautiful Savior, Marietta, Ga., is at a crossroads. While it is a healthy, growing, financially stable congregation, the church's leadership knows that the congregation needs to make some decisions about where it is going in the future. Does it expand in its present location or relocate to a better spot? Does it daughter a congregation? Does it look into opening a school? And how does staffing play into the picture?

"We've been blessed, but we'd like to be more proactive and aggressive in reaching out and deciding how best to serve our community with the gospel," says Lucas Bitter, pastor at Beautiful Savior.

Knowing its need to do some long-range planning, the congregation turned to the Commission on Congregational Counseling (CCC) for help with the process.

Part of the synod's Congregation and Ministry Support Group, the CCC works to assist congregations to assess and evaluate current ministry and to develop and carry out plans to adjust or expand that ministry. Through the new Self-Analysis and Adjustment program, counselors take congregations through a process that helps them examine their ministry and make decisions about where they want to go in the future.

The program has four phases. First, a congregation provides the counselor an extensive look at the congregation's current ministry program, statistics, and history; its community's demographics and characteristics; and its membership's analysis of the congregation's ministry through an online survey.

Next, the counselor visits the congregation for a weekend-long assessment. "The heart of this program is an all-day Bible study where a congregation really gets to think about what it can do to the glory of Christ in its community in various areas of ministry based on what Scripture says," says Jon Hein, CCC director. Through information

gathered from breakout groups at the Bible study, the counselor then works with the congregation to analyze how the congregation is doing in various areas of ministry—what is working and what needs improvement.

The counselor then takes that information home and puts together a summary report as well as recommendations for the congregation. Different modules—or virtual libraries of information—provide the resources that will help the congregation tackle an area it wants to improve. Then the real work begins for the congregation—implementing the action plan.

According to Hein, the whole process will take about a year. But the final goal isn't just to complete this process—it's to show congregations how to continue to analyze and assess ministry in the future. "This isn't a magic bullet that when you're done with the CCC program, everything's going to be going well," says Hein. "It's not. In fact you're going to be more acutely aware that things aren't always going well. But you'll also have an idea of how to address that."

Currently 25 congregations are involved in the Self-Analysis and Assessment Program; 120 more have shown interest. The CCC recently trained 30 additional counselors to work with congregations, with plans to mentor future counselors later in 2015. Hein is also continuing to gather material and to work with the other CMSG commissions to produce more resources for the program's modules.

Bitter says Beautiful Savior, which completed its assessment weekend in October 2014, is excited to continue in the process. "God willing in six to ten months we'll have a five- or ten-year plan, but we'll also have refined our ministry in many different areas as we work to be good stewards of all the different gifts and the people that we have."

First impressions at The Springs

A woman approaches The Springs in Sparks, Nev. She's driven by this church a thousand times, but today she is ready to stop. She was raised Lutheran, so the church's teachings are familiar. She's made up her mind, though. If no one greets her here, she'll go somewhere else.

As she walks from her car to the rented community room where the church service is held, she's stopped by a group outside. They welcome her and introduce her to Ryan, who brings her inside and shows her around. Soon Ryan introduces her to the pastor at The Springs, Steve Hillmer. Within minutes, the woman is sharing her troubles with Hillmer, and he is able to assure her that she'll hear God's Word and find the comfort for which she's searching.

Hillmer also explains some of the practical aspects of the service such as the hymnal and the worship folder. As the two head into church, Ryan reappears and asks the woman to sit with him and his family so that they can help her during the service.

Following the service, the woman visits with Ryan and other members of The Springs. She leaves carrying a copy of the church newsletter, a *Meditations* devotion book, and a flyer promoting The Springs' Bible information class.



Events like this Easter for kids program have helped The Springs interact with its community and build a reputation for itself as a friendly church while sharing God's Word with local children.

This woman's experience is fairly typical of a visitor to The Springs. As Hillmer notes, "Members exude a very friendly and welcoming atmosphere. So many of them know what a wonderful home they've found here at The Springs; with our mother church, Shepherd of the Mountain in Reno; and WELS."

This atmosphere is a reflection of Shepherd of the Mountain, which decided to work with the WELS Board for Home Missions in 2008 to support a new mission church in the northern Reno area. Hillmer arrived and began serving his call to The Springs in July 2008. About 15 members of Shepherd of the Mountain became members of The Springs and formed the core group for this new mission. On Palm Sunday in 2009, the group held its first worship service.

Over the years, the congregation has reached out to the community in many ways, including canvassing; holding camps for kids; and advertising through newspapers, flyers, and direct mail pieces. The Springs' membership has grown steadily and now stands at more than 150.

"It's been a while since we've been actively canvassing," says Hillmer, "but our members are actively inviting friends and family. The number of three-generation families that we've taken in through Bible information class is amazing, and it usually involves a baptism or two."

In 2014, The Springs was finally able to purchase its own land. With help from WELS Church Extension Fund, Inc., it looks forward to building its first worship facility in 2015. Hillmer and his members anticipate an even greater increase in attendance and membership when they are worshiping in a permanent location rather than a rented space.

No matter where they worship, though, the congregation will continue to greet each visitor with enthusiasm and Christian love.

Reaching students through campus ministry

"Campus ministry was very important to me over my years at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point (UW-SP). With the stress, temptations, and busy schedule of college, it would have been very difficult to keep God as number one without the support of campus ministry. I am so thankful I attended campus ministry and would encourage everyone in college to attend," says Tarah Smith, a 2014 graduate of UW-SP and member at St. Luke's, Oakfield, Wis.

WELS Campus Ministry had an impact on Smith, and programs at UW-SP and many other colleges regularly reach not only WELS students but also others who want to learn about God's Word.

Currently, Divine Word, a congregation in nearby Plover, Wis., serves the Stevens Point campus. Every Thursday, 20 to 25 students meet to study God's Word and to share in a meal prepared by volunteers from the congregation.

"We try to let them know that they're part of our congregation, that we're their home away from home," says Scott Wolfram, pastor at Divine Word. "As much as possible we want to make them a part of our congregation."

Campus ministry has been an important ministry to Divine Word, as it offers nearby college students a church home and the opportunity to continue building their relationship with God, explains Scott Dimler, congregation president. He says, "In order to have any successful program that we do at Divine Word, the congregation has to be not only supportive with volunteering their time and talents, but also it is an important part of our ministry, so we do have budget money set aside each year to support it."

Now the congregation has decided to take its efforts even further. With financial support from the WELS Campus Ministry Committee, Divine Word plans to call a second pastor to serve not only the campus but also



The new student orientation booth at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point.

eventually the Stevens Point community. The goal is that a second pastor will be able to offer more fellowship opportunities and spiritual guidance as well as build stronger relationships with the students.

Ken Brokmeier, chairman of the WELS Campus Ministry Committee, says, "If a congregation is interested, the Campus Ministry Committee is happy to try to partner with local congregations to get something going." Brokmeier says the Campus Ministry Committee has funds available to help congregations get a campus ministry off the ground and will provide guidance on what a program should look like and how the congregation can get involved.

"Being able to meet with other students who share a faith with me and being able to study God's Word with them is truly a blessing," says Casey Urbanek, a student at UW-SP. "Campus ministry provides an opportunity for me to step away from all the stress and challenges of college life and focus on my relationship with God while growing in faith with other students."

Do you know college students who need spiritual support and encouragement? Submit their contact information at www.wels.net/campus-ministry. Congregations interested in starting an organized campus ministry should contact Ken Brokmeier at kenbrok@brookings.net.

LET YOUR LIGHT SHINE

Showing Christian love and support can make a difference. People notice, and you never know what the results will be. Take this example from one of our area Lutheran high schools:

It was the 2013 playoffs for high school football. Arizona Lutheran Academy (ALA) in Phoenix had had a great season, earning the right to host its first two playoff games on campus. The first school they were playing was Hopi High School from northeastern Arizona.

Little did they know that tragedy would strike during that game. Charles, perhaps the best player for the opposing team, collapsed on the field. "Everyone was confused because no one appeared to have hit him," says Kurt Rosenbaum, ALA principal. They got Charles to his feet, and he took a few steps before collapsing again.

The next day, Sunday, several ALA coaches and administrators went to the hospital to see how Charles was

doing. They also collected gift cards to area restaurants from ALA parents for the family while Charles was in the hospital.

Charles died two days later. Cause of death was inconclusive, but it was probably related to head trauma from a previous game. ALA's athletic director went to the funeral to support the family. "It was a sad event because there was no Christian hope," says Rosenbaum.

Meanwhile the ALA community also was dealing with the tragic event that happened in front of a large number of students and fans. "People rallied to the cause. We had a donation that allowed extra counseling services. We also had a special chapel service that helped focus everyone on what is the hope and lesson we can take from this," says Rosenbaum.

Soon it was time for the second playoff game. With all the media coverage, the entire area knew about what had hap-

pened in the first game. ALA planned a small ceremony before the game, beginning with a special prayer. A few minutes into the game, Rosenbaum learned that Charles' sister had made the trip to ALA because she wanted to address the crowd at half time. Rosenbaum asked the football teams to stay longer when half time began. "Then she made her statement," he says. "It was a beautiful expression of thanksgiving and support for what ALA had done for her family. There were many teary-eyed players and parents that night."

He continues, "I feel that this was a great opportunity for the Christian family at ALA to share their love and light with others. . . . We know that this sharing of love and light made a connection with Charles' immediate family as his father commented on that directly with appreciation at the funeral service. . . . It touched all of us here in a very deep way."

WELS news briefs

COMMUNICATION SERVICES

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As a way for congregations to learn more about WELS world missions, **short PowerPoint presentations** that share pictures and facts from our fields will be available for download at www.wels.net/images. A different presentation will be added each month that will correspond with the highlighted field in *Forward in Christ's* new mission series (see p. 28). "This is an excellent opportunity to share with our members the blessings our mission fields receive when we work together as a synod by supporting our mission and ministry through Congregation Mission Offerings," says Lee Hitter, director of communications. "Sharing this brief PowerPoint presentation during the offering or at the conclusion of a worship service highlights the faithful work being done in more than 24 countries." These presentations are in addition to the promotional slides already available that cover topics such as upcoming WELS events and other WELS products and news.

ADULT DISCIPLESHIP

cad@wels.net

David Scharf, pastor at Immanuel, Greenville, Wis., will lead the next **Interactive Faith Bible study**, streamed online live each Wednesday, Jan. 7 through Feb. 11, at 6 P.M. and 8 P.M. CST. His study will focus on portions of the book of Judges. Adult Discipleship sponsors the Interactive Faith Bible online study twice a year. Martin Luther College professor Keith Wessel will lead the fall 2015 Bible study on the ministry of Elisha. Learn more at www.wels.net/interactivefaith.



District news

DAKOTA-MONTANA

Great Plains Lutheran High School, Watertown, S.D., hosted the 2014 WELS West Regional Choral Festival Nov. 14–16, 2014. The festival theme was “I Will Glorify Your Name Forever.”

SOUTH ATLANTIC

In fall 2014, six high school students at **Divine Savior Academy, Doral, Fla.**, were accepted into communicant membership of Divine Savior Lutheran Church after taking Bible information classes there.

MICHIGAN

On Nov. 7–9, 2014, **Michigan Lutheran High School, St. Joseph, Mich.**, hosted the WELS East Regional Choral Festival. This year's theme was “Let the Light Shine!”

For the past ten years, members at **St. John, Westland, Mich.**, have sent Christmas care packages to veterans and brought gifts to local veterans. Children at St. John's school help assemble the care packages and wrap the gifts. St. John's members also hold a coat drive each year for those in

need in their community. St. John has collected more than six hundred coats through this drive.

WESTERN WISCONSIN

Key to Life Childcare and Community Center, a ministry of St. Peter, Schofield, Wis., held its seventh annual trunk-or-treat event in October 2014. This event is a safe alternative to traditional trick-or-treating. Families enjoy fun characters handing out candy from decorated vehicles as well as a free chili and hot dog dinner. Hundreds of families participate each year.

HAPPY ANNIVERSARY!

AZ-CA—On Oct. 26, 2014, **Shepherd of the Hills, Tucson, Ariz.**, celebrated the 40th anniversaries of the congregation and one of its pastors, Alan Eckert.

NA—St. Paul, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, celebrated its 140th anniversary in November 2014.

SEW—On Oct. 19, 2014, **Siloah, Milwaukee, Wis.**, celebrated its 120th anniversary.

On Nov. 9, 2014, St. John, Wauwatosa, Wis., celebrated the service anniversaries of four teachers—**Dave Allerheiligen**, 40 years; **Scott Uecker**, 40 years; **Rita Allerheiligen**, 25 years; and **Naomi Stein**, 25 years.

On Nov. 14, 2014, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis., celebrated the 25th anniversary in the pastoral ministry of **Daniel Leyrer**.

WW—On Nov. 16, 2014, Luther Preparatory School, Watertown, Wis., held a worship service to honor two faculty members for their service anniversaries in the teaching ministry—**Carl Hochmuth**, 40 years; and **Nathan Kieselhorst**, 25 years.

The district reporters for this month are: **AZ-CA**—Michael Schroeder; **D-M**—David Ruddat; **MI**—John Eich; **MN**—Jeffrey Bovee; **NA**—Harland Goetzinger; **SA**—Jonathan Kuske; **SEW**—Scott Oelhafen; **WW**—Brett Brauer.

ARIZONA-CALIFORNIA



On Nov. 9, 2014, Redeemer, Tucson, Ariz., celebrated 70 years of God's grace. Youth and adult choirs and instrumentalists enhanced the festival worship service. Carnival-like festivities followed, including a dunk tank. A tug of war was fought, and relay race winners were awarded a golden shoe trophy.

SOUTH ATLANTIC



On Nov. 1, 2014, Lamb of God, Madison, Ala., hosted its first Renaissance Faire. In spite of challenging weather, more than 60 visitors and 20 members participated in this event, which featured medieval-themed crafts, food, games, and real target practice with a bow and arrow in the church fellowship hall. Visitors were treated to a minstrel show, a fencing demonstration, and an original skit featuring Martin and Katherine Luther discussing themes related to the Reformation.

MINNESOTA



More than 350 people gathered Nov. 16, 2014, to celebrate the dedication of the new worship facility and early learning center for Christ, Hugo, Minn. In support of this project, Christ received low-interest loans on the land and facility and more than \$400,000 in grants from WELS Church Extension Fund, Inc. Pictured is the congregation's baptismal bowl and font with Galatians 3:27 inscribed upon it.

Friendly counselor for Nepal and Pakistan

When WELS World Missions began translating and sending Christian materials to Nepal and Pakistan in 2002 to share God's Word with the people there, it didn't know what to expect. But God had plans for these countries. Even though only one-half of one per-

cent of Nepal's population is Christian and only 1.6 percent in Pakistan, God's Word has spread, and church bodies have developed. Since 2002, the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Church of Nepal has grown from a handful of members in 5 districts to 4,000 souls in 31 districts. In Pakistan, the Bible Correspondence and Teaching School has enrolled more than 43,000 children and adults, and 56 house churches have started since 2012.



Mike Duncan studying God's Word with church leaders in Nepal.

"These churches have been blessed with phenomenal growth. It's an act of God," says Michael Duncan, coordinator for Pakistan. "But how do you serve them? You need shepherds. We need to train leaders."

In an effort to more effectively coordinate leadership and pastoral training as well as ministry efforts in both countries, WELS World Missions has called Duncan to serve full time as a friendly counselor to Nepal and Pakistan. "To help organize what the courses are like, what materials are needed, and how WELS can assist both of these countries, it was high time to have someone

full time looking into this and helping these national churches," says Larry Schlomer, administrator of World Missions. A number of people are ready to be trained in Pakistan, and more than one hundred people are already being trained at some level in Nepal.

Duncan, who had served as pastor at St. Paul's, Fort Atkinson, Wis., has served part time as World Missions' coordinator for Pakistan for the past six years and had also previously served as coordinator for Nepal. He has made several trips to both countries to meet with national leaders and teach Bible courses.

"The Lord has provided us with someone who has a relationship of several years with each of our national contacts so they now can work with him in a trusting environment," says Schlomer. "His heart for the lost is evident."

For now, Duncan will live in the United States and travel to Nepal up to four times a year. The goal is for him eventually to relocate to Nepal. Because of safety concerns, he currently cannot

travel to Pakistan but will continue to meet weekly with our national contact via Skype and will visit once it is considered safe to enter the country.

Duncan says he and his wife, Cathy, consider the opportunity to serve in this way as a privilege and an honor. "It's a true joy being with God's people there," says Duncan. "They appreciate the teachings more than I can express in words."

He continues, "They hunger and thirst for the Word of God. They will travel for days—even on foot—to hear the Word of God. They will sit on the floor for hours. They then take what they learn and go back to their remote villages and teach others. Being with these people and learning God's Word together—it satisfies the deepest part of my soul."

And the time is right to seize these opportunities. "That's my greatest fear—that somehow the door [to these countries] will be closed," says Duncan. "You really realize the urgency of working while it is day."

Learn more about WELS work in Nepal and Pakistan at www.wels.net/missions.

Through my Bible in 3 years



JANUARY 2015

- | | | |
|----------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| 1. 2 Corinthians 6:11–7:16 | 12. Micah 6:1–7:6 | 23. Tit. 3 |
| 2. 2 Cor. 8:1–15 | 13. Micah 7:7–20 | 24. 2 Timothy 1 |
| 3. 2 Cor. 8:16–9:15 | 14. 1 Timothy 1 | 25. 2 Tm. 2 |
| 4. 2 Cor. 10 | 15. 1 Tm. 2 | 26. 2 Tm. 3 |
| 5. 2 Cor. 11:1–21a | 16. 1 Tm. 3:1–13 | 27. 2 Tm. 4 |
| 6. 2 Cor. 11:21b–12:10 | 17. 1 Tm. 3:14–4:5 | 28. Leviticus 1 |
| 7. 2 Cor. 12:11–21 | 18. 1 Tm. 4:6–16 | 29. Lev. 2 and 3 |
| 8. 2 Cor. 13 | 19. 1 Tm. 5:1–6:2 | 30. Lev. 4:1–6:7 |
| 9. Micah 1 and 2 | 20. 1 Tm. 6:3–21 | 31. Lev. 6:8–7:38 |
| 10. Micah 3:1–4:7 | 21. Titus 1 | |
| 11. Micah 4:8–5:15 | 22. Tit. 2 | |

Read or listen online at www.wels.net/spiritual-help/through-my-bible.



Missionstories

Mission work is about people. I know it because I am one person the Holy Spirit has touched with the gospel. So are you. Each believer has a story to tell.

When Jesus said we are to teach all nations, he directed us to touch people of other languages and cultures with the gospel. It's not always easy, and it happens so far away from us sometimes. We may not realize that God's work to bring people to faith around the world continues no matter what happens in our daily schedules.

Wherever the gospel is proclaimed, the Holy Spirit works to bring people to treasure a Savior for all the world.

We want to bring some of these stories to your attention—stories about people who have come to love Jesus. Their stories do not have typical American settings but are decorated with quite different cultures and backgrounds. But in the end it's always the same. God changes one person's heart.

This gives us pause to thank and praise him—as well as to pray, “Your kingdom come,” with another person in mind.

—John Braun

THE GARDENER John E. Holtz

Snip.

A diseased leaf drops to the ground.

Snip.

A twig falls. Clinging to the twig is a mysterious looking sack of tiny eggs.

Snap.

A dead branch is removed with a firm grip and a twist of the wrist.

The one doing the snipping and snapping is Faidal Kubala Beza. Or more accurately said, he used to do it. After all, it was his job some years back. Faidal was in the northern region of Malawi working on a tea and macadamia nut plantation called Kawalazi Estates. As a grounds laborer, Faidal pruned the tea bushes. As a field scouter, he inspected and monitored the bushes and trees for invasive insects, damaging diseases, and unhealthy foliage. And as a field supervisor, he, well, supervised fields to make sure all was growing well.

Faidal had an eye for things that ravaged, destroyed, and hindered; he had a heart for life and growth and fruit. He knew his job well. He understood what had to be done so that better things could be done. He believed what he was taught: Removing the bad fosters the growth of the good.

Hmmm . . . something sounds biblical about that, doesn't it?

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful" (John 15:1,2).

Read it again if you have to, but note something important. It's not just the fruitless branches that get cut, even the fruitful branches are pruned!

Can't you just see the Gardener at work in the undergrowth of our lives? With a keen eye, a loving heart and a skilled hand, he's there—lifting; inspecting; and, when need be, cutting.

Faidal knows very well the purpose of pruning; he is equally familiar with the pain of being pruned.

Aren't we all? Who has not felt the sharp edge of the Gardener's shears? A snip here. A snap there. And all of a sudden, something is . . . well . . . gone. Removed. No longer part of our life.

Faidal graduated from the seminary in Lusaka, Zambia, in 2008. He then was assigned as a vicar to a small preaching station in northernmost Malawi—Karonga. In 2009 he was called, installed, and ordained as pastor at St. John's in Chitala Village on the eastern edge of Malawi. By 2012 he was in the central region of Malawi, serving three congregations in the Kasungu area. Now in 2014, Faidal has recently taken up residence at Mwalaulomwe, having been called to serve three congregations in that parish union.

Within six years Faidal and his family have been in five places. Farewell sermons. Painful good-byes. Another door to close. Yet another congregation to leave.

The Gardener was at work.

"It was never pleasant," Faidal recalls. And I agree, the shears never is.

If the Gardener removed anything from the Beza family, I have a hunch what it was: comfortableness.

Why do I think so? Well, consider this . . .

Each of the congregations that Faidal was serving struggled to fully support him and his family financially. At one point, Faidal was at a crucial crossroads. He was desperately concerned for the well-being of his family—even basic survival. He had to scrounge around just to provide daily meals for his wife, three children, and two dependents. He actually ended up selling some of his meager possessions in order to buy food.

Snip. Snip. Snip.

The comfortableness of life that Faidal and his classmates and their families had enjoyed while studying at the Lutheran Bible Institute in Lilongwe, Malawi, and the seminary during their six years of schooling was gone. The perks that came with campus living were removed the very day he and his classmates left the seminary campus. In one fell swoop, what had been provided to the students and families was gone: housing,

water, electricity, gardens, maize, and a cash stipend.

These things were no longer so readily available. Though the calling congregations were responsible to provide these things, they didn't always do what they said they would. Life for the Beza family just became . . . well . . . uncomfortable.

The glint off the blade of the shears was blinding.

Blinding, yes, but not to his eyes of faith. With those God-given eyes, Faidal could see something else.

With the eyes of faith he could see the loving hand of the Gardener, who was holding and using the shears for pruning his life.

When word of his struggles came out in the open, the Lord moved into action the hearts and hands of individuals and also our synod as a whole. Tangible help was given: salary support, housing allowance subsidy, and even a bicycle.

With such assistance, Faidal no longer had to be as consumed agonizingly with financial concerns for his family. Faidal could freely do the work to which he had been called: bringing God's gospel to God's people.

And talk about an opportunity to share the Word of God! Now that Faidal is living and serving at Mwalaulomwe, he has an automatic mission field coming to him every Thursday literally out his back door.

Each week, hundreds of women bring their children to the *Malo a Chipatala Cha Lutheran Mobile Clinic* (literally translated:

the place of the hospital of the Lutheran Mobile Clinic). Morning devotions with the people mean they are reminded of the grace and mercy that comes new every day through Jesus.

So how are things going for Faidal and his family now?

Well, the gate is broken, the borehole needs fixing, the inside walls need paint, electricity needs hooking up, the windows need screens, and the outside kitchen needs air ventilation. But Faidal sees these things in a new light. Earthly comforts are nice but aren't necessary; God, in Christ Jesus, promises so much more and so much better than those things. We have the comfort of the forgiveness of sins and life everlasting in a home prepared by Jesus himself.

To be sure, the pruning in his life hasn't stopped. But neither has his faith.

Through Word and sacrament, the Lord keeps growing that faith. Interestingly, the name of the church where he serves now is *Chikhulupiliro*, which means "faith."

In faith, with his eyes fixed on Jesus, the true vine, Faidal continues working in the fields. He's laboring on God's estate.

Faidal is confident that the Lord has an eye on the things that ravage, destroy, and hinder his people and at the same time has a heart for life and growth and fruit.

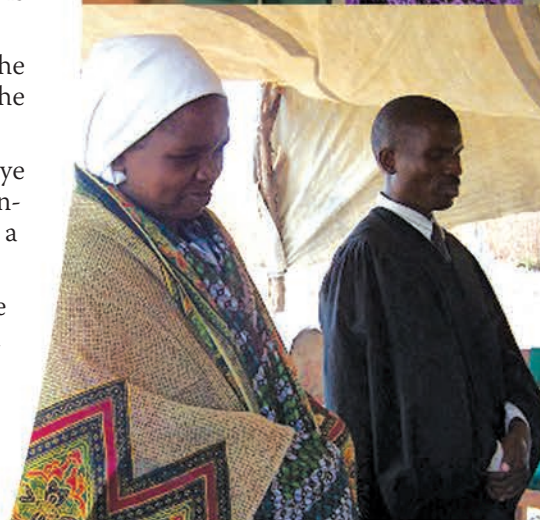
Like Faidal, the next time you feel a *snip* here and a *snap* there, take time to offer up a prayer of thanks. Let the pruning remind you that the Gardener is at work.

John Holtz is a missionary in Malawi, Africa.



The WELS mission field in Malawi is asking for used iPhone 4 donations for African national pastors to use in their ministries. Learn more at www.wels.net/missions.

Top to bottom: Faidal and his family; Faidal and his wife, Sophi; Kapaizi Lutheran Church, a congregation Faidal served in 2012.



THE LUTHERAN CHURCH OF CENTRAL AFRICA— MALAWI SYNOD

Established: 1963

Baptized members: 40,000

Organized congregations: 128

Missionaries: 6

National pastors: 26

Unique fact: Known as the "Warm Heart of Africa" for the hospitality and friendliness of its people, Malawi is the largest WELS mission field.

Go to www.wels.net/missions to learn more about WELS missions.



My refuge

**Even when I am a brute beast,
my Savior gently rescues me.**

Tracy Siegler

Therapists, social workers, counselors—they tend to ask questions that are fairly mundane. They want their clients to do most of the talking, so they make the experience as nonthreatening as possible and they keep things open-ended. That's why my therapist really got my attention when suddenly her question was very direct.

"When was the last time you felt deep, complete joy?" she asked. "You know, when you feel like everything is just about perfect in your world at that moment."

I'd already had several sessions with this therapist, and she knew a lot of the details of my life by now. She knew that things were generally pretty good. I'd had a happy childhood in a stable, nurturing, Christian family. I was married to a man I loved and who loved me. Our healthy, happy son was just over a year old. We had everything we needed, and yet, in five years, I could not remember a time when I'd felt deep joy.

I gazed at the floor, trying to come up with something. "Definitely on my wedding day," I said. "But that was over five years ago." I stared out the window, as if something out there would bring back a memory. "There must be something since then. Surely *something* when my son was born. . . ." Nothing on the ceiling jogged my memory either.

"You're thinking way too long about this," the therapist said. "It shouldn't be that hard."

It wasn't just that I lacked joy. As our fifth wedding anniversary came around, the picture was more grim than that. Too often anger and frustration with this circumstance or that offense made me rage inside. Sometimes I couldn't keep it inside, and I was downright ugly to be around. My husband bore the brunt of my foul mood. A few times I yelled at my son, but even when I held it inside I feared that he would sense my grumpiness and pent-up rage. I feared it would adversely affect his emotional development.

I wish I could say that I prayed fervently that God would help me find joy. But when I was seething with rage, I didn't pray and I didn't want to look to Scripture at those moments. My default self, opposed to God, was firmly in control. I just wanted to be angry. Looking back, I can honestly confess with Asaph the psalmist, "When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you" (Psalm 73:21,22). The only prayer my troubled spirit was capable of forming was a feeble "Lord, help me. . . . Help us. . . ." breathed into my tear-stained pillow from time to time.

Only God knows how long I might have let this go on—and how bad it might have gotten. But he had a plan to turn things around for our little family. We were preparing for my husband's first deployment to the Middle East with the United States Air Force. I feared that our marriage would not make it through four months of physical separation. I feared that my mental state would prove harmful to my son's emotional well-being. So I sought the help of a therapist.

The diagnosis was dysthymia—mild, long-term depression. I continued my sessions with the therapist. She coached me in coping strategies. I made sure I was getting sufficient sleep. I exercised regularly. I was faithful in my daily Bible study time. I read books about nurturing our marriage relationship and worked to apply what I learned. I ate nutritious meals. I allowed myself to

relax and be unproductive once in a while. But the brute beast was always there, ready to rage if provoked.

Then one day the therapist suggested medication. I balked slightly, thinking surely if I really trust God—if I really have faith—shouldn't the certain hope of salvation bring me joy? My Savior loved me enough to take the punishment for my sins upon himself. Shouldn't that be enough to make me happy? Was I relying on pills to solve my problems, and is that a sin?

The joy of the Lord is my strength, even when I don't *feel* joyful.

I talked with my husband about it. We agreed that if I did indeed have a mental disorder, it was okay to try some medicine. Besides, the time for him to deploy was approaching like a freight train. If pills might help, then we needed to give it a shot.

That was almost nine years ago.

I have been on antidepressants ever since, with the exception of my pregnancy with my second son. God has given me the ability to feel joy again—the deep, complete kind. There are still problems in my life, and I still struggle. As a doctor once told me, "Medication can only make you normal. It can't make you happy *all* the time."

I have also found that medication on its own doesn't do the trick. Regular exercise helps a great deal. I need daily time in God's Word as well. I may end up taking those pills for the rest of my life. I'm okay with that. I don't rely on pills to solve my problems, though. I rely on the Lord, who led me to the relief that the medication provided.

God told his people through the prophet Nehemiah, "Do not grieve,

for the joy of the LORD is your strength" (8:10). I have come to know that the joy of the Lord is my strength, even when I don't *feel* joyful—even when my emotions don't express what my soul knows. Now, by God's grace, I am often able to feel the joy he gives through faith in his Word.

Psalm 73, the one that talks about the "brute beast," ends like this:

Yet I am always with you;
you hold me by my right hand.
You guide me with your counsel,
and afterward you will take me
into glory.
Whom have I in heaven but you?
And earth has nothing I desire
besides you.
My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart
and my portion forever.
Those who are far from you will
perish;
you destroy all who are unfaithful
to you.
But as for me, it is good to be near
God.

I have made the Sovereign LORD
my refuge;

I will tell of all your deeds. (vv. 23-28)

God did not abandon me when my sinful nature was in control and anger and frustration made me rage inside. Thanks be to God that my husband loved me "as Christ loved the church" (Ephesians 5:25), because he didn't abandon me either.

God waited until my spirit was quieted and then—in that still, small voice—he spoke to me gently through his Word. He showed me that his love is constant. Even when I am raging, his love is calm and steadfast. When I am a brute beast, he looks at me and loves me. Then he gently rescues me.

Tracy Siegler is a member at Christ Alone, Fort Worth, Texas.

Good2Go

Kenneth L. Brokmeier

We should
be zealous to
speak with our
children and
others as
advocates
for God's
affirmative
"Wait!"

In the fall of 2014, a free new app called Good2Go became available for cell phones. Lee Ann Allman created Good2Go following conversations with her own college children about the problem of sexual assaults on university campuses.

The purpose of Good2Go is to make sure that casual sex between two people is consensual. Allman hopes that college students all across the country will download and use the app before engaging in sexual activity.

According to an online Sept. 30, 2014, *Huffington Post* article, only one person needs to have the app on his or her phone. Once a user decides to have sex with someone, he or she launches Good2Go and eventually gives the phone to the potential partner, at which time the app seeks consent by asking, "Are we Good2Go?"

The choices are (1) "No, thanks," (2) "Yes, but . . . we need to talk," or (3) "I'm Good2Go." If the potential partner indicates he or she is Good2Go, the app asks if he or she is "Sober," "Mildly Intoxicated," "Intoxicated but Good2Go," or "Pretty Wasted." If one of the first three options is chosen, the user can give his or her consent. If "Pretty Wasted" is chosen, the app states the user cannot give his or her consent and is instructed to give the phone back to its owner.

In the article, Allman notes, "If the app becomes a tool that is adopted across campuses, we believe that it will reduce sexual assaults, unwanted or regretted encounters."

Let me be clear and state that sexual assaults, wherever and whenever they occur, are wrong. In that sense I appreciate Good2Go's efforts to try and prevent them. Critics, however, are quick to point out that rapists and sexual assailants are not likely to download this app to seek consent before violating someone else.

In that same article, Allman acknowledged that another purpose of the app is to teach

young people "the language of affirmative consent." The danger is that for all intents and purposes, as noble as this app might seem, Good2Go may be reduced to become yet another euphemism like "casual sex" or "hooking up"—a term for having sexual intercourse outside of marriage.

Such an attitude and approach stand in direct contradiction to God's clear directives that "marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral" (Hebrews 13:4).

At Christmas we see a couple who understood God's design and purpose for his gift of sex. Mary questioned how she would become pregnant, since she was a virgin (Luke 1:34). Joseph, after learning of Mary's pregnancy and knowing he was not responsible, was going to divorce her. And when Joseph learned the true cause of Mary's pregnancy, he did not engage in sexual intercourse with her until after Jesus was born (Matthew 1:18-25). Using God's gifts properly is always best.

iTunes and Google pulled Good2Go about a month after its release—due to some potential privacy issues. Allman has resolved to create Version 2 that will settle those issues.

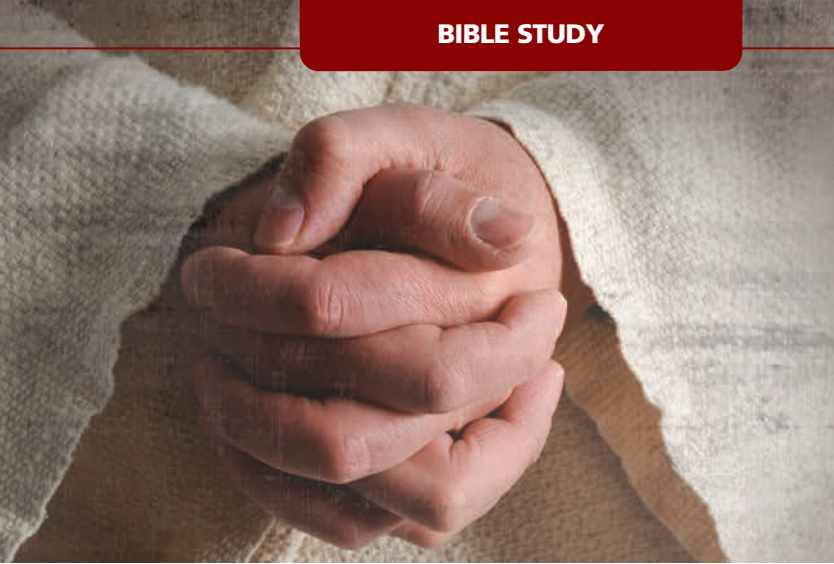
But rather than encouraging college students or others to download and use the latest version of Good2Go, maybe we should be zealous to speak with our children and others as advocates for God's affirmative "Wait!"

God designed his precious gift of sexual intercourse to be used only within the bonds of marriage. This means that the consent—and a commitment—is given at the time of marriage, when a man and woman pledge themselves only to each other as husband and wife by vowing, "I will."

Contributing editor Kenneth Brokmeier is pastor at Our Savior, Brookings, South Dakota.

JESUS

PRAYED FOR US



Nearly half of Jesus' prayers include praise or thanksgiving.

Samuel C. Degner

A few bites into the meal, the child at the dinner table says, "Wait . . . did we pray yet?" Dad looks at Mom. Mom looks at the kids. The kids look back at Dad. Everyone sees the same uncertain expression. No one remembers.

Giving thanks before or after a meal is a routine for many of us—too routine, perhaps. It's a good habit, but we may not always think about the well-worn words we're saying. They become only a brief prelude to the main event.

JESUS GAVE THANKS FOR DAILY BREAD

Giving thanks was part of Jesus' routine too. Nearly half of Jesus' prayers include praise or thanksgiving. On several different occasions, we see Jesus "blessing" or giving thanks for food. It seems so natural and so casual that it would be easy to miss this important act, especially considering the kinds of things that happened afterward. Loaves and fishes multiplied to feed crowds of thousands (John 6:11; Mark 8:6). Divine body and blood were passed around the Passover table (Matthew 26:26-29).

The mysterious travel companion revealed himself over supper in Emmaus (Luke 24:30). The prayers that preceded these miraculous events could easily be overlooked.

Let's look a little closer at one of those events. Let's sit down for supper with Jesus. Sorry, there are no chairs, no table on this hillside; a spot on the grass will have to do. You weren't invited? That's okay; neither were most of tonight's dinner guests. Look around you. Thousands of men—not to mention their wives and children—have come from the nearby villages to see Jesus. It's getting late, and they're getting hungry. The available menu looks much too meager: just a little bread and fish. Don't worry. Jesus will make it stretch.

The Father remembers
Jesus' grateful prayers as
if they came from our lips.

Before he does, though, he must give thanks. You might think that the outdoor setting, the famished crowds, and the sinking sun would all be valid reasons to skip this part and get right to the meal. Still, Jesus feels compelled to pray—not just out of habit or because of Jewish custom, but for the sake of his heavenly Father. You watch as he lifts his eyes to heaven and speaks words that make it clear to the crowds that the bread is a gift from God.

JESUS' GRATEFULNESS RENEWS OUR THANKSGIVING

It is possible that they were the same words that heads of households all over Galilee were intoning with their families that evening. Yet when the one giving thanks for bread is also the one multiplying it, something is different. When the one blessing the barley loaves also proclaims himself the Bread of Life that must be eaten for salvation, we do well to take notice!

Sure, it's just one unrecorded sentence spoken by a Savior who taught for hours most days. But everything Jesus did and said, he did and said for us. Jesus gave thanks on our behalf for all of the gifts, great and small, that we have received from God. His words of praise to our heavenly

Father make up for all the times we have asked for and enjoyed our daily bread—and so much more—without feeling or expressing gratitude. Just as the Scriptures tell us to do, Jesus prayed with thanksgiving.

"Did we pray yet?" The Father answers, "Yes!" Someone did what we sometimes forget. The Father re-

members Jesus' grateful prayers as if they came from our lips. For that we can renew our desire to give thanks!

Contributing editor Samuel Degner is pastor at Bethel, Menasha, Wisconsin.

This is the third article in a nine-part series on Jesus and his prayer life.



When we find our
hearts troubled,
anxious, confused,
impatient, or just
restless, the cross
sustains us.

The cross

Everything will work out! We've all heard that little encouragement in the face of difficulty. Of course, it's not really such a little encouragement. It's God's promise (Romans 8:28), and we rest our confidence on his promise. With a little effort, we can easily find some favorite supporting passage to bolster the message of Romans 8:28. And we go on.

But as we look at the path ahead, we don't know how it will all work out. Our experience with the path we've already traveled may not be as helpful as we hope. In some cases, I have heard Christian friends comment on how God has turned events out for their good. Yes, sometimes we can see how God has guided all things. But I've also heard Christian friends question God and wonder why things didn't work out.

It's not that they didn't wait long enough to see how God worked for their good. It's been years and even decades without any relief. The pain persists. Perhaps physical pain. Maybe mental or psychological. Perhaps even both. They may ask when they can wake from the nightmare, only to find no end. We may be a bit naïve to think that Christians do not endure chronic pain and enduring trouble. They do.

A couple of things, then, can happen. First, the question, "Where is God when you need him?" leads to abandoning God altogether. The confession then becomes, "God can't help me, so I'm giving up on God." Pain leads to anger, defiance, bitterness, and then a self-imposed isolation from God. We may have talked with people who have chosen this path.

The anguish of chronic suffering also can lead to a second response. Faith turns to Jesus for more strength. Pain may at first lead to anger and bitterness, but it makes a sharp turn back to the promises of God. In those promises, the sufferer finds power to persevere and hope.

It also seems to me that turning to the promises of God in such difficulties brings one to acknowledge a couple realities. The first is that we are all limited and flawed humans infected by sin. That's our lot here. Because of that, we know we are not God. That leads us to another reality. God is greater than we could possibly imagine. He exists beyond what we can fully grasp. Job had to confront that reality when he complained about his suffering (Job 38–42). His ways are not ours. His thoughts are not ours (Isaiah 55:8).

One more reality. God has not left us in the predicament of only knowing our limitations and his superiority. He demonstrated a deep love for all sinners. We know his heart by looking at a little baby in Bethlehem. We learn the depth of his heart by looking at the cross and the One who suffered there. So much he cared! He did not promise to remove every pain and trouble, but he did come to reveal his love so we might endure them all, no matter how devastating or prolonged. He loves us and wants us to be with him forever—soon without pain and trouble.

The path ahead this year is unknown. When we find our hearts troubled, anxious, confused, impatient, or just restless, the cross sustains us. God loves us and has proven it by the death and resurrection of his Son. We may not have all the answers we want on the path ahead. We may be profoundly confused, but we have one important assurance of God's deep and ultimate love—the cross of Jesus.

"We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, . . . of one being with the Father." Joel D. Otto

How can the Son be as completely divine as the Father, just as almighty and eternal? Wouldn't that have to mean that there is more than one supreme deity? How exactly do the Father and the Son relate to each other? Those were questions that the Christian theologians and teachers were discussing and debating in the fourth and fifth centuries.

A number of them, influenced by Greek philosophy and a desire to make Christianity palatable to "intellectuals," argued that the Son has to be less than the Father. That fit philosophical logic. Their solution was to make the Son less eternal and powerful than the Father. They viewed the Son as subordinate to the Father, the first creature of the Father.

But the orthodox leaders of the church recognized the implications of such a solution. First of all, the Bible would be lying. The Bible is clear in the Old and New Testaments. Jesus is God. He is the Mighty God (Isaiah 9:6). He is the eternal Word who is God from all eternity (John 1:1-3). While Jesus is descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, according to his human nature, he is also God over all (Romans 9:5).

Second, the leaders of the early church recognized that if Jesus is not truly God, equal with the Father, then we should not worship him, trust him, or pray to him. Yet, Jesus says that the Father and the Son are to receive the same honor (John 5:22,23). Jesus tells us to believe in him for eternal life, even equating faith in God with faith in him (John 14:1,6; 17:3). Jesus invites us to pray to him with the promise that he has the power to answer (John 15:7).

Finally, the church fathers understood the implications for our salvation if Jesus is not truly God, equal with the Father. He could not be our Savior. His sacrifice on the cross would not be sufficient. But because Jesus, true God and true man, was crucified, we can be certain that his

sacrifice is valuable enough and precious enough to take away the sin of the world (John 1:29; 1 Peter 1:18,19).

The writers of the Nicene Creed did not try to explain or rationalize the truth that the Son is equal to the Father. They chose language that clearly confesses what the Bible has always taught. There is only one unique Son who is distinct from the Father but just as eternal as the Father. He is of the same divine substance as the Father. We continue to confess this truth about Jesus for our eternal salvation and comfort just as all believers have.

EXPLORING THE WORD

1. Read Philippians 2:6-8. Explain how Jesus can be equal with the Father, yet he could say that he does not know the day or the hour of the final judgment (Mark 13:32).
2. Read Ephesians 1:15-23. How does knowing that Jesus is "of one being with the Father," equally divine, help you as you face troubles and problems? How does this help you in your prayer life?
3. "Jesus is Lord" is the simplest confession of faith we find in the Bible (e.g. 1 Corinthians 12:3). What is all implied in that confession?

Contributing editor Joel Otto, professor at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wisconsin, is a member at Salem, Milwaukee.



This is the third article in a 13-part series on the Nicene Creed. Find this study and answers online after Jan. 5 at www.wels.net/forwardinchrist.

We
believe
as all
believers
have

Full of blessings

**God promises to
bless us so much
this new year
that we will need
more than ten
thousand years
to praise him.**

Christopher S. Doerr



What's New Year's Day like in heaven?

Do they even have it there?

The Bible says that with the light of Jesus' face, they don't need sunshine there (Revelation 21:23). But without a sun for the earth to orbit around, how long would a year be?

Yet the Bible talks about how, when God creates new heavens and a new earth, being a hundred years old won't be old at all (Isaiah 65:17,20). So it might be okay to think about heaven having years.

TEN THOUSAND YEARS TO PRAISE HIM

We sing about heaven's years in the last verse of the hymn "Amazing Grace—How Sweet the Sound": "When we've been there ten thousand years, Bright shining as the sun, We've no less days to sing God's praise Than when we'd first begun" (*Christian Worship* 379:4).

What will ten thousand New Year's Days in heaven be like?

In heaven, New Year's never means another year without the loved ones we lost. There we won't worry, "What sorrows will this year bring?" There New Year's won't mean making resolutions, because we were perfect in every way the year before.

But the best part of New Year's in heaven? The hymn verse says it. Even after ten thousand New Year's, "we've no less days" to look in our Savior's eyes and see for ourselves just how praiseworthy he is. How will that feel—to be able to say, "Today I begin

my ten-thousand-and-first year of reveling in my Savior's glory"? Wow.

But don't stop there. That eternal hope is meant to fill us with hope for our New Year's on earth too.

Hope—because, as his believing children, God promises to bless us so much this new year that we will need more than ten thousand years to praise him!

Isn't that how we should think about that ten thousand years of praising God in heaven? What will we praise him for? Only for how great heaven is? Oh, no! Also for how great he was to us in our lives on earth, including how greatly he will have blessed us in the year 2015—through the sermons we will have heard, through the prayers he will have answered, through the outcomes he will have arranged for every event and trial, and for so much more.

And when we've spent ten thousand years there praising him for New Year's blessings, we'll have no less desire, nor fewer new songs, nor any less time to praise him "than when we'd first begun."

COUNTLESS BLESSINGS FOR WHICH TO THANK HIM

What if I expect that much out of 2015?

Unlike all other people, Christians can be sure God will bless them in each new year. Luther says in the Large Catechism, "For all outside of Christianity, whether heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites, although they believe in, and worship, only one true God, yet [they] know not what His mind towards them is, and cannot expect any love or blessing from Him" (II.66). Without

Christ, how can they know!

Really, in every part of my Christian life, God promises blessings. Following his Commandments? Many passages promise blessings for that (see Psalm 5:12; 112:2). Confessing the Creed? He promises not to withhold anything good from those who trust in him (see Psalm 34:10; Jeremiah 17:7). Praying as he taught me? He'll answer better than I can ask or imagine (see Matthew 7:7-11; Ephesians 3:20). Suffering? He'll turn it into great good (see Job 23:10; Romans 8:28).

What if I expect every day to be full of those blessings? Blessings I'll need more than ten thousand years to praise him for?

An increased faith like that would, in itself, be a tremendous blessing this new year!

Christopher Doerr is an editor at Northwestern Publishing House, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.