

Forward in Christ

A LUTHERAN VOICE

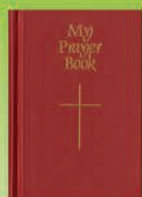


Lessons from the grave

The message of the cross and the empty grave changes how we look at death, life, and cemeteries. *Page 10*

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

WHAT'S INSIDE

You may be wondering why the Easter issue of *Forward in Christ* prominently features cemeteries. Let's face it. As spring approaches, this isn't the most cheery of topics. Yet three authors this month share messages of hope that can be found in places reserved for death.

- Pastor James Mattek reflects on lessons he learned when serving as a caretaker for the church cemetery as a teenager (p. 10).
- As a pastor, Steven Lange has had his share of funerals and cemeteries. He tells of these often tear-filled journeys to the gravesites and then reveals why these journeys don't have to end in despair (back page).
- Prof. Theodore Hartwig retells a story from long ago at a gravesite near Jerusalem where Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene and turns her sorrow into joy (p. 26).

Jesus lives, and so shall we! That's a message that we can proclaim until our last breath. Even as death overtakes us, we have the hope—and promise—of spending eternity in heaven with our Savior. That's something to cheer about!

Julie Wietzke



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ORIGINS: TWO MODELS

Dr. Eggert's series "Origins: Two Models" [Dec. 2015, Jan.] excellently conveyed that the foundation of evolution and the scientific method is naturalism, which is based on faith, not fact.

However, I am troubled by Dr. Eggert's statement that the church is "not commissioned to reform the institutions of the world" and that "the time and effort expended to reform them do nothing to fulfill the Great Commission." First Peter 3:15 calls us to give a defense (πολογία) for the hope we have. While we should not allow science to inform our theology, it can support our apologetic. God is the creator of matter, energy, space, and time. The created world is a mask of God that is accessible to all people: "God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made" (Romans 1:20). From the complexity of the cell to the fine-tuning of the universe, the intelligence of the Creator God is apparent. Naturalism and evolution lack explanatory power to account for these. As Siegbert Becker stated in *The Foolishness of God*, "we may use reason to show the unbeliever the untenableness of his position and the unwarranted nature of his conclusions."

Suzanne Knapp
Fox Point, Wisconsin

Your articles are usually well written and good. But "Origins: Two Models" [Jan.]—you have published much better articles about creation. True science study shows us God's majesty that is "clearly" seen in all creation from viruses to humans, atoms to mountains. "Love the LORD your God . . . with all your mind": That means to learn all we can about God from his Word, using it to correctly understand his creation.

Linda Nielsen
Greenwood, Wisconsin

REFORMATION ARTWORK

There still is time to be more clear!

When reading with excitement about the upcoming celebrations of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, a con-

cern keeps surfacing in my mind. The artwork . . . it is so focused on Martin Luther. I do not see the overt celebration or thanks to God that my heart wants to see. "Grace. Faith. Scripture." still does not say "God." I know without a doubt that thanks and praise to God are there in the minds of the artist and committee members, but the artwork doesn't seem to show it clearly.

Also, still in this day, when I have friends and acquaintances who continue to think Lutherans worship Luther (yes, they do!), it seems that we Lutherans need to do the best job possible to show that we worship the God of the Bible. If this artwork were for Lutherans only, maybe. However, if the plan is to invite the world to celebrate with us, I think we could and should make a more clear declaration of who it is we are celebrating, worshiping, and thanking for five hundred years of Reformation grace.

Ramona Saatkamp
Portland, Oregon

Reformation was an earth-shaking event that traces its origin to Martin Luther. That reality is recognized by people of all Protestant denominations and by the Roman Catholic Church too. The church at the time of Luther was in desperate need of reform. The

heart of that Reformation is captured in the three words: "Grace, Faith. Scripture." All three of those words go back to Christ. Only by God's undeserved grace in Christ are we forgiven. By faith in Christ alone we receive God's gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation. By the Scriptures alone and not in the words of any man—Luther included—we find what God has revealed to us about his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. That emphasis is the center of our celebration. We will turn to Luther and the events that unfolded under God's direction five hundred years ago and renew our commitment to proclaiming grace, faith, and Scripture. God willing, we will use the celebration of the Reformation not simply to rehearse a historical event or our own heritage but to renew our commitment to Christ and proclaim him to our friends and communities. This is our goal for the celebration of Reformation in our congregations.—ed.

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*.

Through my Bible in 3 years

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2016
APRIL 2016

- | | | |
|----------------------|---------------------|-----------------|
| 1. Matthew 22:1-14 | 12. Matt. 27:1-14 | 23. Jer. 34 |
| 2. Matt. 22:15-46 | 13. Matt. 27:15-31 | 24. Jer. 35 |
| 3. Matt. 23:1-22 | 14. Matt. 27:32-50 | 25. Jer. 36 |
| 4. Matt. 23:23-39 | 15. Matt. 27:51-66 | 26. Jer. 37, 38 |
| 5. Matt. 24:1-31 | 16. Matt. 28:1-20 | 27. Jer. 39-41 |
| 6. Matt. 24:32-25:13 | 17. Jeremiah 26 | 28. Jer. 42, 43 |
| 7. Matt. 25:14-46 | 18. Jer. 27, 28 | 29. Jer. 44, 45 |
| 8. Matt. 26:1-16 | 19. Jer. 29 | 30. Jer. 46, 47 |
| 9. Matt. 26:17-29 | 20. Jer. 30:1-31:26 | |
| 10. Matt. 26:30-56 | 21. Jer. 31:27-40 | |
| 11. Matt. 26:57-75 | 22. Jer. 32, 33 | |

A pleasure? A privilege. And a promise!

I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. John 13:15

Joel C. Seifert

I spent more than a decade waiting tables. As people thanked me for bringing them food and clearing away their dirty dishes, the answer would roll off my lips automatically: “My pleasure.”

Spending time in a hot, muggy kitchen; juggling orders from a dozen tables; memorizing specials; and taking away scraps—I was grateful for my job, but do you think it really was a pleasure?

SERVING ISN'T ALWAYS A PLEASURE

Imagine being in the room with the disciples on that first Easter evening. They saw their Savior, risen to life and victorious over death. Their friend really did have power over everything; God himself was on their side, and he called them to follow him. You'd think that kind of life would bring the greatest joy!

Perhaps that's why, the last time they had seen him, Jesus taught them one last lesson: he washed their feet (John 13:4-7). The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve. That meant raising a dead girl to life and being overcome by the hugs of her grateful parents and sitting at Zacchaeus' table as the host rejoiced to bring out his best dishes. And it meant days of exhaustion as the needy lined up outside his door and cold nights in the wilderness when he was chased out of towns. It meant beatings and a cross. Serving so often means lowering yourself further than you thought you could go. Service is the Son of God scrubbing the toes of sinners.

It's good to live in the joy of Easter, but don't let that joy give you a false impression of what it means to serve. True service isn't found in picking the tasks that give us fulfillment or bring us respect. It's reaching further down to help those who need it.



SERVICE IS A PRIVILEGE, BACKED BY GOD'S PROMISE

Service isn't always a pleasure, but it is a privilege. When we serve others, we're following in our Savior's footsteps. And he gives us a promise as we do: “I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant

Service isn't always a pleasure, but it is a privilege. When we serve others, we're following in our Savior's footsteps.

is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them” (John 13:15-17).

On Easter Sunday, we sing our songs of victory. Everything God has prom-

ised us is true. Since Christ rose from the dead, our sins are forgiven. Heaven is our home. All things do work for our good.

And serving others in humility brings blessings. Every dirty diaper changed. Every church meeting that runs long into the night. Every floor mopped. Every door we nervously knock on. In every act of service that calls us to stoop down low, God takes our eyes off of our own importance. Then we marvel at the truth that God himself stooped even lower to pay for our sins—and all out of love for us. That's a privilege.

Victorious Christian, serve others with Easter joy. It might not always be a pleasure, but it will always be a privilege that God blesses. Your risen Savior promises it.

Contributing editor Joel Seifert is pastor at Shining Mountains, Bozeman, Montana.



Mark Schweden

Statistics, while
never an accurate
measure of the
impact or “success”
of the gospel, . . .
can be a measure
or an indication
of our own
stewardship of the
means of grace.

Our hands, God's harvest

Recently I saw a statistic that is both surprising and disturbing. In a presentation on how to reach out to the community with the saving gospel message, the presenter noted that in one recent year 51 percent of the 1,270 WELS congregations had one adult confirmation or less. More than 500 had zero. Those are some sobering and significant numbers.

We know that the mission or health or success of the church is not measured in statistics. Only the Holy Spirit, working through the gospel, converts sinners and brings them into God's family. We know from Jesus' parable of the sower that faithful proclamation of the Word does not always bring people to faith. Three of the four places where the seed fell did not produce what we might think of as the “right” results. In fact, sometimes faithful proclamation of the Word repels and hardens people rather than attracting and winning them. A church that is faithful to the Scriptures needs to recognize that such faithfulness sometimes leads people to leave rather than to join.

But statistics, while never an accurate measure of the impact or “success” of the gospel (the gospel *always* succeeds in doing what God wants it to do), can be a measure or an indication of our own *stewardship* of the means of grace. In other words, statistics, while never calling into question the power of the Word, can and should lead us to ask, “Am I faithfully using those means that God uses to build his church?”

When we see a church or a synod in apparent decline, we are tempted to conclude that we need to come up with some way to turn that around. With all good intentions, people sometimes look to innovative methods and programs to attract people to the church. Maybe if we offered a less-threatening worship experience, maybe if we find ways to make the church seem more relevant to the everyday lives of people,

maybe if we did more research to find what people are really looking for in a church, maybe if we laid it on the consciences of people to become involved in organized evangelism and outreach programs—maybe then the church will grow and the numbers will increase. An entire industry focuses on providing ideas and methods to “make the church grow.” Sad to say, many are attracted to well-packaged programs that appeal to the eye but have little impact on the heart. All too often the programs offer people what they want rather than what they really need.

Faithful stewardship of the means of grace does not focus on statistics and will not look for easy “fixes.” But it should lead us to ask whether or not we are doing all we can to bring the gospel to as many as possible. That can certainly happen through organized programs such as an early childhood education center or a Lutheran elementary school. It can happen as congregations do all they can to interact with visitors and to help guests feel welcome in their worship practices. It can happen when congregations find ways to connect with their communities. Most important, though, it happens when congregations and members find ways to develop relationships with people. Such relationships enable us to communicate, to show genuine personal concern, and to gain the trust of those whom we will invite to learn more about the Savior.

If we are faithful in planting and watering, we know that God will make it grow—as he graciously determines and as he wills.

Light for our path

"I don't want a religion; I want a relationship." I have seen this quote quite a bit lately. Is there any risk in me using it?

James F. Pope

There is always some risk in being misunderstood when we use language and phrases that might be used in ways different from our intention.

IS RELIGION A BAD THING?

From the sound of it, the quote seems to say that religion is bad. Is it?

Dictionary.com offers several definitions of *religion* including "something one believes in and follows devotedly," "a specific fundamental set of beliefs and practices generally agreed upon by a number of persons or sects," and "the practice of religious beliefs; ritual observance of faith." There is nothing bad about religion from those definitions unless a person does not want to be locked into a "set of beliefs and practices" or has an objection to certain worship practices.

And that is precisely what can lead some people to say, "I don't want a religion." They may want to believe only what they think is best. Or they may want freedom from organized religion and its forms of worship. "I can worship God in nature" replaces "I rejoiced with those who said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the LORD'" (Psalm 122:1).

ISN'T TRUE RELIGION ALL ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS?

"I don't want a religion; I want a relationship." From the sound of it, that quote seems to say that religion and relationships are worlds apart. That is not at all the case. True religion is all about relationships. True religion, that is, Christianity, means enjoying a relationship with God and having the privilege of calling him our Father. The opening words of the Lord's Prayer illustrate that truth. True religion means enjoying a relationship with Jesus and having the privilege of calling him our Brother. "Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same

family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters" (Hebrews 2:11).

True religion, Christianity, means enjoying additional relationships. God's design is not that his people become hermits and live far removed from society. No, God's intention is that his followers interact with fellow human beings, encouraging fellow Christians and serving as light and salt to the unbelieving world. Interestingly enough, the Bible even pairs the word *religion* with human relationships. "If a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God" (1 Timothy 5:4).

True religion, then, is all about relationships, isn't it? The relationships people enjoy with God their Father and Jesus Christ their Brother as well as the relationships people experience with others. Without question, true religion, Christianity, is all about relationships—the vertical and horizontal kind.

So is there any risk in your use of the quote "I don't want a religion; I want a relationship"? Sure, there is always a risk in being misunderstood if you use an expression that others use for their own purposes. There will be no mistaking what you mean if you say, "If you want a religion and a relationship, you will find both in Christianity."

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 wels.net/questions. Submit your questions there or to fic@wels.net.

Your word
is a lamp
for my feet,
a light on
my path.

Psalm 119:105

A woman with blonde hair, wearing a grey knit beanie and a dark, belted coat, is looking down at a grave. In the foreground, there are purple and pink flowers. The background is a cemetery with other graves visible.

MOMENTS of reflection

Working in a cemetery
brought time to think
about death, life, friends,
and the cross of Jesus.

James A. Mattek

It was a pretty typical day in the cemetery . . . until she wouldn't leave. So, we just waited and watched from a distance.

I was the teenage caretaker for the church cemetery . . . not a bad job for someone paying his own way through a Lutheran high school. With a hand shovel, I had dug the grave the day before. Those I stood with were from the vault company that had lowered the open cement vault into the

hole, covered the pile of dirt I created with green carpet that was intended to resemble grass, and then set the device in place that would lower the casket into the vault once the mourners had left.

But one stayed. From a distance she appeared to be in her 40s. I could see her wipe her eyes. She was having a hard time. At first the vault crew looked at their watches in irritation; they wanted to get this over with and

go home. Then, with me, they just watched in silence. There's something about death that makes most people stop and think. *"Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom" (Psalm 90:12).*

Finally, she placed her hand on top of the casket and then slowly made her way to her car and was gone. I walked to where she had stood for so long. The name of the deceased and her birth year were already etched on the

stone. She had died young—I guessed she was about as old as the woman who had just said her good-bye. Was she a good friend, a high school classmate, a cousin, a sister? Death severs bonds with a cruel dull knife. *“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (John 11:32).*

As I stood there, the crew backed the truck up. After lowering the casket, they would cover it with the cement lid. Then they could pack up and finally go home. That’s when my work would begin, shoveling the dirt back into the hole.

In the years that followed, it dawned on me that I had witnessed things about death that most people don’t. As dignified, respectful, and sterile as we attempt to make death appear, there is still something rather ugly about it. Those bodies were once warm and alive with hopes and dreams, work and play, family and friends. Then it all stopped, and they were put in the cold earth. *“The living know that they will die” (Ecclesiastes 9:5).*

As the casket slowly descended, I noticed it. The casket had a decorative cross on its cover. That was the very place where the woman had laid her hand. It’s been 44 years, but I can see that cross like it was yesterday. The message of the cross and what occurred on the third day changes so many things . . . about death, life, and cemeteries. *“Death has been swallowed up in victory” (1 Corinthians 15:54).*

I recall that the tedium of my job at the cemetery began to change too. I began to notice things that I had missed and to appreciate things I had taken for granted. As I drove the Ariens rider for countless hours between the gravestones, I started to notice names and do the math. Some had lived long lives, others only months or days. Some died as teenagers, which really hit me and made me think. Maybe I wasn’t as indestructible as my young mind imagined. What if that happened to me? Was I ready? Good Friday and Easter

had been important to me for as long as I could remember. The events of those days now took on additional meaning—and the setting was a church cemetery on hot summer afternoons. It’s amazing how our Lord inspires introspection and budding spiritual maturity in the oddest places. *“For dust you are and to dust you will return” (Genesis 3:19).*

It’s amazing how our Lord inspires introspection and budding spiritual maturity in the oddest places.

My mind-numbing job gave me time to think. As I rode along on the mower, I recall thinking about my mother who led evening devotions for the family while my father was in meetings at church. There were the Sunday worship experiences. I remembered the names of the fine Christian teachers I had in the Lutheran grade schools I attended and the high school I was enrolled in. The importance of things spiritual began to click—the hymns I sang; the Scripture verses I memorized; the Bible stories I learned and relearned; and the Christian example of my teachers, some who I now realize helped me more than they know. *“Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:58).*

I remember a few gravestones in particular. I asked an old-timer from the cemetery board about the woman who died young. On her stone was the word *baby*. “She was a good church-going woman,” he said. “She died in childbirth, and the baby died a bit later. The pastor got there in time to bap-

tize him. In the casket the baby was in her arms.” The events of Good Friday and Easter—a mother forgiven through the shed blood of God’s Son, and a baby washed in the spiritually medicinal water of Baptism. Together their souls entered glory to enjoy the embrace of their Father. I cut the grass around their stone with extra care and contemplation. *“Whoever lives by believing in me will never die” (John 11:26).*

Today, when I get back to the area, I try to visit the cemetery and take a stroll. I’ve noticed the names of three friends from my grade school days. We played football together at recess. I want to believe that they remembered the Bible stories we were taught . . . stories about Job and others. *“I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth” (Job 19:25).*

Word has filtered back to me that a number of my high school classmates have already been taken by car crash, farm accident, even congenital disease. We had sat together in religion classes for four years. Did they hold on to what they were taught and believed? I want to think so.

After a recent visit, I made one last stop at the place where she had stood for so long. I could still see the cross in my mind’s eye . . . where she had laid her hand. Then I looked out over the cemetery and tried to imagine what it will be like. No, not what it will be like to lie in my grave, but what will this place look like when our Savior returns and calls the dead back to life? What a sight!

“After my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes. . . . How my heart yearns within me!” (Job 19:26,27).

James Mattek, director of ministry at WLCFS-Christian Family Solutions, Germantown, Wisconsin, is a member at Trinity, Watertown, Wisconsin.



Paul reminded the Ephesians that they are saved by grace alone, but he also reminded them—and us—that God puts us here for a purpose.

James R. Huebner

If someone walks up to you on the street and asks, “What’s your purpose in life?” you might be hard pressed to come up with an answer on the spot. But a little review of Ephesians chapter 3 will help. In this chapter, Paul zeroes in on three purposes for our life on earth.

GROW CLOSER TO HIM

The apostle experienced the warm and welcoming power of God’s undeserved mercy, his grace. The Lord God had forgiven Paul fully and freely for his bad past and for his future failures. That happened in only one way. Jesus had paid for his failures and covered him with full and complete forgiveness.

God has done that for sinners like us too. He does not count our past or future sins against us. Because Jesus is our substitute we are free from the burden of the consequences of our sin. “In [Christ Jesus] and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence” (Ephesians 3:12). God desires us to draw close to him. That only happens as we use the Holy Spirit’s power tool, the words and promises of Holy Scripture. As we study the Scriptures, the Holy Spirit strengthens us and comforts us. Our faith grows!

The synod’s 2014 Statistical Report indicates that 15 percent of WELS communicants participated in Bible class. Can we do better? Of course. It’s obvious that pastors and congregational leaders will always be striving to encourage more members to participate in some form of Bible study. On this we agree: One purpose for our life on earth is to grow in faith, and that happens only when the Spirit is using his means of grace on our hearts.

If someone walks up to you on the street and asks, “What’s

your purpose in life?" one part of your response will be, "God wants me to grow closer to him, and that happens when I dig into and ponder his Holy Word." That purpose in life is true for all of us.

SHARE THE LOVE OF JESUS

If you are lost in the woods but finally see a path with a few fresh footprints, you will be thinking, *Whew! At least there's someone nearby who can help me.* If you follow those tracks and come across all kinds of footprints that go in every direction, you will jump out of your skin with excitement because now you are near civilization and all kinds of people. You are safe!

God's love for us works like that. There's so much to chew on, to celebrate, to revel in. When we ponder one aspect of his love, it connects us to another and another, and we can hardly contain ourselves.

That's what Paul means with the words "unsearchable riches of Christ" (Ephesians 3:8 ESV). He had been given God's love in Christ and was bursting with joy at the depth, width, height, and length of Christ's love. That love filled him with a powerful desire to give it to others. Good thing God put him to work in ministry. Paul might have exploded if he didn't have an outlet to share God's love with others.

The joy of Christ's love fills all of us with a desire to share it with others. You don't have to leave your career, sell your worldly goods, and set out on a trek through the barrios of Barcelona or the alleys of Atlanta or the jungles near Jakarta. God has placed us where we are, and there we can share his love. What we do individually as witnesses for Christ is multiplied exponentially when we pool our resources and work together with fellow Christians. Our mission efforts depend on us working together. Christians working together serve as a beacon to cut through the fog of spiritual uncertainty and to guide many more who are headed toward shipwrecking their lives on the reef of unbelief to the safe haven and harbor of God's own heart. Reports from WELS World Missions always open our eyes to the global opportunities for proclaiming Jesus to the millions who don't know him and don't believe in him.

There are other opportunities closer to home. The 2014 Statistical Report indicates that 531 of our 1,269 WELS congregations had zero adult confirmands and another 173 had only one. That's 55.5 percent of our congregations. Can we get better at our personal witnessing and congregation evangelism efforts? Of course. While it's obvious that some congregations are located in small towns or rural areas with a population density far less than a city, I believe that

in every WELS congregation someone has to know someone (a spouse, a relative, a neighbor, a friend) who needs to hear about Jesus. So, we flee to the cross for forgiveness for our lack of good-news-proclaiming zeal and for encouragement and strength to share the love of Jesus.

If someone walks up to you on the street and asks, "What's your purpose in life?" one part of your response will be, "God wants me to share his love with you so you can be with him now and forever." That purpose in life is true for all of us.

WORSHIP AND HONOR OUR SAVIOR

We know that there is no biblical prescription as to when Christians are to gather for worship and what they are to do when they gather. However, over time and many centuries, Christians have developed patterns and language in which God comes to us in Word and sacrament and we go to him with praise, prayers, and gifts. What I find instructive about those patterns is that even the "God comes to us" parts reflect the praise, hymns, and prayers of Scripture. They are not merely acclamations of God's greatness, majesty, and power but also proclamations of what God did for us. Even those psalms that are considered "praise psalms" (e.g. Psalms 145–150) include language that proclaims why we praise God. Whatever the form or pattern, one thing is clear: Worship is not optional.

The day and time of day are not what makes worship God-pleasing. The style of music and instruments enhances the message but is not what makes worship God-pleasing. Worship is not primarily about what we do. Instead, it is a review and retelling of what God has done for us.

If someone walks up to you on the street and asks, "What's your purpose in life?" one part of your response will be, "God wants me to worship and honor him every moment of every day and especially when I gather with fellow Christians." That purpose in life is true for all of us.

No matter how old or young you are, no matter how tall or short you are, no matter the amounts and distribution of melanin pigment in your skin, no matter where you live, we are one in purpose as we grow in faith, proclaim the good news of Jesus' love, and privately and publicly worship him. No disagreements or dividers here. That's what it means to be one in Christ.

James Huebner, pastor at Grace, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, is the first vice president of WELS.

This is the third article in a four-part series based on the 2015 synod convention essay entitled "One in Christ."

Weighed down by the law, a man discovers true freedom in the gospel.

Julie K. Wietzke

Brandon Hughes is no stranger to religion and different religious teachings.

“What I’ve been used to for 30 years of my life are the drastic highs and lows of the American evangelical experience. I had the worst of everything from Calvinism, Roman Catholicism, mysticism, and the law-based American evangelicalism,” he says.

But through all that, he never found the peace given through the saving message of the gospel. Instead he felt pressure to live a perfect life—something he knew he was incapable of doing.

Then he discovered Lutheranism. “I went to a Lutheran church where they just preach God’s Word and people just live their lives,” he says. “When they speak about the gospel, when they speak about church or the Bible, none of it is forced—it is who they are.”

That gospel message ended his harried search for a way to gain salvation.

He continues, “It’s really wonderful having that peace and being able to rest.”

WEIGHED DOWN BY THE LAW

Hughes was raised as a Southern Baptist in Austin, Tex. “It was very law heavy and performance based,” he says.

He discovered the same heavy emphasis at the popular nondenominational church he started attending when he was in college.

After working a few years in the oil business, he had the opportunity to live overseas in Indonesia. Although he was nervous about how the largest Muslim country in the world was going to react to practicing Christians, he discovered that the city he lived in was open to all types of religious beliefs. He ended up joining a Charismatic church. “I was pretty freaked out the first few times I saw people get hit on the head, fall over, and start doing the flop,” he says. “Without a firm biblical foundation, I had no idea what to think about that. Is this real? Am I a doubting Thomas? Am I not opening myself up to this?”

Hughes says it wasn’t that he was unfamiliar with the Bible—he had read it cover to cover as a teenager. But he said he always was focusing on himself while he read. “Was it Luther who said, ‘If you don’t understand the distinction between law and gospel, the Bible is a closed book?’” he says. “It was very closed to me because I was looking in the Scriptures for myself.”

Not completely happy with his church, Hughes began downloading sermons from popular pastors in the United States. Some were Baptist, and some were Calvinistic. “I would listen to four or five sermons a day,” he says. “I was kind of overdosing in these law-based, performance-based teachings mixed in with the worst of Calvinism and double predestination.”

His failures began to drive him away from the Bible and religion. “I would do well for a while and then I would fall into whatever sin,” he says. “And after repeatedly being faced with my sin, I started doubting my salvation because I didn’t see this gradual improvement in my life. I came to the very difficult conclusion that I was one of the non-elect—I was predestined to hell.”

He says he began to despair. He would read the Bible but would hate what he read. “I was in the process of walking away from Christianity,” he says.

FUELED BY THE GOSPEL

But God had other plans. Though Hughes had never met a Lutheran or been in a Lutheran church before, he—“by the grace of God,” he says—stumbled on a Lutheran podcast about a liberal religious book he had just read. “[The pastor] presented the gospel in all its sweetness, and it’s the first time I can remember in my life



Confessions
OF FAITH

hearing the gospel and believing,” says Hughes. “I wasn’t left with something to do. It rocked my world.”

Hughes began downloading Lutheran books and podcasts. He also began reading the Bible again. “Now that I understood law and gospel, it was a completely new book for me,” he says.

While he was thrilled about the new teachings he was discovering, he was also angry and confused because he felt betrayed by pastors and teachers whom he had trusted for years. “All the beliefs that I’ve held in my life—that I had been taught—were crumbling before my eyes.”

He continued reading, buying stacks of Lutheran books when he returned to the United States for his yearly visit. He left the Charismatic church and began holding Bible studies in his home to share his newfound discovery of the gospel with his friends.

His friends noticed the difference in him, and they didn’t like it. After he shared what he had been learning about the gospel, they not only rejected the teachings but also told him he needed to go back to being the person he was before. Hughes began having doubts.

The next time he returned to the United States, he decided to visit a Lutheran church for the first time to make sure he was headed down

the right track. “I can’t describe what I felt when I stood among the other believers and sang hymns to God,” he says. “It was a true fellowship with believers—I had never experienced that before.”

Feeling lonely and ostracized by his old friends in Indonesia, Hughes decided it was time to return permanently to the United States. Although he had never heard of WELS, he found Faith, West Newton, Pa., online and began listening to sermons posted on the congregation’s website. He decided to visit.

It was not what he was expecting. “I was still in that evangelical sermon mode and looking for an engaging lecture,” Hughes says. “When I visited the church for the first time I thought a) That was really short and b) That wasn’t exciting.”

He began visiting other denominations closer to where he lived, but he kept finding that old self-help message from his past. He decided to return to Faith, the church that gave him the message of the gospel.

“What I absolutely love—it sounds silly—is that Pastor preaches what the Bible says,”—a practice Hughes wasn’t used to. He says he appreciates it when pastors go through Scripture verse by verse in their sermons instead of using the text as a springboard into popular contemporary issues.



Brandon Hughes

Hughes started taking Bible information class at Faith and was confirmed in 2013.

“The thing that struck me the most is how normal everyone was in church,” he says. “It’s just normal people living normal lives, fueled by the gospel.”

Julie Wietzke is managing editor of Forward in Christ magazine.



heart to heart
parent conversations

Our authors this month are at three very different stages in their parenting journeys. Yet each one offers valuable advice for helping children learn how to manage money in a God-pleasing way. Do you have advice on this important topic? E-mail fic@wels.net to share your thoughts and experiences.

Have you visited Heart to heart's website lately? The site offers webcasts and podcasts on each month's topic, as well as expanded versions of the articles printed in this column. Some months, additional articles are also posted that complement what is shared here. Visit wels.net/forwardinchrist today.

Nicole Balza

Join the conversation!

Visit 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 DO WE TEACH KIDS TO MANAGE MONEY IN A GOD-PLEASING WAY?

A few years ago, our church offered a Christian financial planning program that focused on helping people get in control of their money. The class changed everything money-related in our marriage (for the better!) and made us much more conscious of what habits we wanted to impart to our children.

We ordered a junior financial planning kit for our daughter, Anna. One of the main points in the junior program is that a weekly allowance is out because then kids learn that they get money for nothing. The program favors a chore/commission approach instead.

We created a chore chart for Anna with age-appropriate chores and associated commissions for each one. If she did the chore that day, she'd get paid; if not, then no money. At the end of the week, we'd tally up how much money

As I sit down to write this article, my oldest son is beginning his final semester of college. Our time of instructing him in our home is nearing an end. I'm pretty sure it was only yesterday that I took his little hand and led him into his kindergarten classroom. On that fall day 16 years ago, and on the many days that followed, it seemed like our years of parenting would stretch on forever. It seemed like there were unlimited days left for teaching opportunities in our home. Now I am facing a bittersweet ending, a closing of a chapter in our parenting lives.

So I have a confession to make. In hindsight, one of those teaching opportunities that my husband, Thad, and I often failed to be intentional about was modeling a God-pleasing attitude toward money and possessions, and better yet—a focus on living out of gratitude for the Lord and all he's blessed us with. We thank God that, in Christ, he forgives our shortcomings as parents!

Laughter. Uncontrolled. "The parenting column wants you to write about teaching kids finances?" My wife's question was punctuated by gasps for air. "Do they know you haven't written a check in decades?"

When she regained her composure, I meekly asked, "Wife, would you help me write this article?" Thankfully, she agreed. Sharon's tips are intended to start the conversation about the financial training of children.

MAKE USE OF TEACHABLE MOMENTS

"Can we go out to eat tonight?"

"No, Sweetie, we don't have money in our budget for that."

"Can't we just go to the bank and get some more money?"

Use these teachable moments to talk about

- your spending priorities ("We can't afford that right now, but we are saving for it"),
- getting the best deal ("Is the better buy at Amazon or eBay?"),

she had earned and pay up. She sorted her weekly pay into three pouches. She used one for saving, one for spending, and one for giving. The giving envelope came with us weekly to church for the offering. Any time we went to the store, she could bring her spending money.

We have admittedly fallen away from following this as closely as we did in the beginning. But the principles we learned from that program have endured. I'll offer the kids chores to do, or I'll support a lemonade stand in the summer if they ask for spending money. They both love putting money in the offering tray on Sunday mornings, and gathering contributions for the offering has become part of getting ready for church in our house.

My rule for shopping with the kids is if they want something that isn't on my list, they better have brought their spending money. And if they forgot, then we can bring it next time.

This has worked surprisingly well at squashing a lot of the begging that occurs on our shopping expeditions.

I feel like Andy and I have established a fairly good base of teaching our kids to manage their money, but there is still a lot we want them to learn. I want to teach them about budgeting and living within their means; about saving strategically for future and potential emergencies; about credit cards not being the key to freedom I thought they were in college; and about giving generously, using their gifts from God to benefit others.

Kerry Ognenoff and her husband, Andy, have a daughter in second grade and a son in preschool.



Here are some important lessons that Thad and I have learned and are still working to teach in our home regarding our attitude toward money and possessions:

- Everything we have—from the comfortable house we live in to the stray paper clip at the bottom of the junk drawer—is a gift “from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights” (James 1:17). We are simply the blessed and undeserving recipients of these gifts. When we have that attitude, we start to view our possessions as a “privilege,” instead of a “right.”
- We need to show our kids *how* to give sacrificially to God in response to all our blessings and verbalize *why* we give. As parents, we must model how to earmark the first portion of our income to support God's work. It is a very intentional response to our blessings, and it serves others—and becomes more meaningful than just a few coins hastily shoved into the little Sunday school envelope five minutes before the service begins. (And yes, we did this.)

- We need to model how to do an honest day's work—for which we earn an honest wage. We can't raise the next generation to do nothing and yet expect something in return. When we have to work hard for something, it carries a higher value.
- Our value is not dependent on how much money we have in the bank or what brand of car we drive. Quite simply, our value is dependent on who we are in Christ. We are redeemed children of God, and nothing on earth is worth more than that.

Is it too late for Thad and me to teach our kids these lessons in our home? No. Although our boys are legally adults, they are still our children. We are still Mom and Dad, and it is still our number one responsibility to instruct them in God's truth and in how to view our lives—and all we have—as gifts from a loving heavenly Father.

Ann Jahns and her husband, Thad, have three sons, two in college and one in high school.



- judging quality in what you buy (“This coat is less expensive, but will that more expensive coat last longer?”), and
- resisting impulse buying (“Why do you suppose stores put candy and snacks next to the checkout?”).

SHOW HOW YOU MANAGE YOUR FINANCES

“What are you doing, Mommy?” my daughter asked when she was in grade school.

“Paying bills, Honey. That check is for your school. This one pays for that new coat we bought you last month. But there are lots of bills I don't have to write checks for. We pay many of our bills with money that comes right out of our checking account. That's how we pay to live in this house and how we pay for our car. But do you see that check over there? That's the first one I write because I want to make sure there is always money for it. That's our offering to Jesus.”

EXPLAIN HOW YOU HANDLE YOUR FINANCES

- Show them what happens when you scan your church's QR code to make a donation.

- Walk them through your family budget sheet.
- Let them sit with you as you electronically transfer money between your savings and checking accounts or set up automatic withdrawals. Of course, keep passwords secure.
- When they are in junior high, help them set up a joint checking and savings account with you. Monitor how they manage that responsibility.
- Talk about the percentage of income you give to your church and other charitable organizations. Emphasize how God's grace prompts you to be as generous as possible.
- When money is tight, remind them that because Jesus is your Savior, your heavenly Father will continue to care for you. Tell them family accounts of God's providence.

James and Sharon Aderman raised three daughters and are now enjoying their eight grandchildren.





teentalk

Never hold back

Let your light shine even when someone is trying to dim it.

Krystal Taylor

I was having a relatively good day. Work was going fine. We were not busy, but we were also not completely dead. I thought the day was just going to be like any other day: help customers, eat some ice cream, and chat with my coworkers for a bit. That is until my coworkers, who are both 17, started talking about their sex lives.

Now, I don't want to judge what people talk about, but I was getting very uncomfortable, so I asked if we could talk about something else. I thought they would let it go and move on, but one of them turned on me and said, "That's right. You're a Christian. You don't know anything. Get real."

I was honestly blown away. All I could utter was "Yes, I am," but nothing else came out.

Has something like this ever happened to you? You are just going about life, and it seems for no apparent reason you are being judged for what you believe and you don't know how to handle the situation. Sure, people get judged all the time for what they wear or how they

look, but this is deeper than just style choices. This is something that many of us are not used to and have never truly thought of what to do if it ever did happen.

As children, many of us went to church regularly, and even though sometimes we did not quite understand what was being preached, we knew that Jesus was our Savior. We—myself included—never thought of what it would be like to be called out for our faith. We knew that not everyone agreed with what we believe and might openly confront us about it. It just never hit home that it really could happen.

That type of situation may not seem like a good thing, but in reality it is a blessing from God himself. This is a chance to bring another person closer to Jesus. "Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matthew 5:12).

When facing a situation like this, never forget that Jesus went through the same exact thing, along with his dis-

ciples. Jesus was certainly not accepted by all, and he still isn't. Yet he always kept his head high. He continued on and tried to help all who confronted him—and all others too. Some of the disciples were stoned and put to death, yet they stuck to God and are now enjoying paradise with him.

God is always with us and will never forsake us. I now know what I should have done in that situation: Speak up and proclaim what I believe. We need to be bold in what we say and do and not think of it as a task that hurts but as an opportunity to open someone's eyes. "However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name" (1 Peter 4:16).

Krystal Taylor, a junior at Lakeside Lutheran High School, Lake Mills, Wisconsin, is a member at St. John, Jefferson, Wisconsin.

A new resource for teens is now available on the WELS website. These weekly teen devotions offer God's guidance for the unique situations teens face. Check out the devotions at wels.net/transformed.

CHANGES IN MINISTRY

Pastors

Cook, John K., to Zion, South Milwaukee, Wis.

DeNoyer, Matthew P., to Bethany, Fort Atkinson, Wis.

Hartman, Paul J., to coordinator for the Apache mission field

Hartzell, Eric S., to St. Peter, Globe, Ariz.

Kunde, Arnold J., to Grace, Durand, Mich.

Martin, Joshua C., to St. John's, Jefferson, Wis.

Natsis, Matthew S., to Good Shepherd, Livermore, Calif.

Schaeve, Matthew J., to Faith, Sussex, Wis.

Unke, Thomas G., to Shepherd of the Hills, Las Vegas, Nev.

Vanselow, Duane R., to retirement

Teachers

Dennings, Jeremy L., to Grace, Oshkosh, Wis.

Ehnert, Amy S., to Grace, Oshkosh, Wis.

Enstad, Sarah B., to Crown of Life, Hubertus, Wis.

Giddings, John A., to Fox Valley Lutheran High School, Appleton, Wis.

Janke, Joseph J., to Manitowoc Lutheran High School, Manitowoc, Wis.

Johnson, Kimberly D., to Shepherd of the Valley, Westminster, Colo.

Krause, Emily M., to Christ the King, Palm Coast, Fla.

Prell, Rebecca J., to Petra, Sauk Rapids, Minn.

Thies, Steven J., to St. John, Watertown, Wis.

Ungemach, Carrie L., to First German, Manitowoc, Wis.

Staff ministers

Kleist, Daniel A., to St. Peter, Fort Collins, Colo.

ANNIVERSARIES

Little Chute, Wis.—St. Luke (50). Apr. 17. Worship, 9 A.M.; Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary concert, 3 P.M. Website, www.stlukeslittlechute.com.

St. Paul, Minn.—St. John (145). May 22. Worship, 9:30 A.M.; potluck to follow. 651-771-6406. Website, www.stjohnnev.net.

Lewiston, Minn.—St. John (150). July 3. Worship, 8 and 10:30 A.M.; meal to follow. 507-523-2280. Website, lewistonlutherans.org.

COMING EVENTS

Marriage enrichment weekends—

Throughout the year, WELS Adult Discipleship holds marriage enrichment weekends around the country. Information on registration, along with descriptions of the focus topics for the various enrichment weekends, can be found at wels.net/events.

WELS Nurses spring conference—Apr. 1–2. Center for Mission and Ministry, Waukesha, Wis. Theme: “Our Time of Grace.” Website, www.welsnurses.net. Sue, 262-677-3485.

Wisconsin Lutheran High School auction—Apr. 9. Wisconsin Lutheran High School, Milwaukee, Wis. Registration is open. Website, www.wlhs.org/auction.

Dedication—Apr. 10. St. Paul, Menomonie, Wis. Open house, 1-2:30 P.M.; worship, 3 P.M.; meal to follow. Website, www.spwels.org.

WELS regional handbell festivals—Website, www.welsbells.com.

- Southeast Region festival—Apr. 16–17. Peace, Hartford, Wis.
- Northeast Region festival—Apr. 23–24. Grace, Oshkosh, Wis.
- Western Region festival—Apr. 30–May 1. St. Croix Lutheran High School, West St. Paul, Minn.

Minnesota District OWLS rally—Apr. 18. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn. To register, contact Dale Markgraf, 507-354-2735, demarkgraf@gmail.com.

WELS National Staff Ministry conference—Apr. 21–23. Wisconsin Lutheran High School, Milwaukee, Wis. Website wels.net/events.

Concert—Lutheran Chorale of Milwaukee. Apr. 24. Atonement, Milwaukee, Wis., 2 P.M.; Trinity, Waukesha, Wis., 6 P.M. Mary Prange, 414-861-7092.

WELS Church Librarians' Organization conference—Apr. 30. Zion, Columbus, Wis. Rebecca Retzlaff, 920-623-2623.

Commencement events—

- **Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn.**—May 13. Concert, 4 and 7:30 P.M. May 14. Graduation service, 10 A.M.; call day service and assignment of graduates, 2:30 P.M.
- **Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis.**—May 17. Vicar assignment service, 7 P.M. May 19. Call day service and assignment of graduates, 10 A.M.; concert, 7 P.M. May 20. Graduation service, 10 A.M.
- **Luther Preparatory School, Watertown, Wis.**—May 20. Concert, 7 P.M. May 21. Graduation service, 10 A.M.
- **Michigan Lutheran Seminary, Saginaw, Mich.**—May 27. Concert, 7 P.M. May 28. Graduation service, 10:30 A.M.

Tiny Steps, Big Hearts walk—June 11. Hosted by New Beginnings—A home for mothers. Hart Park, Wauwatosa, Wis. Website, welsrc.net/event/tiny-steps-big-hearts-2-mile-walk/.

53rd Annual Lutheran Women's Missionary Society convention—June 23–26. Pheasant Run Resort, St. Charles, Ill. Theme:

“Christ Alone, Our Cornerstone.” Registration is open. Website, www.lwms.org.

WELS International Youth Rally—June 28–July 1. Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colo. Theme: “Our God Reigns.” Registration is open. Website, wels.net/events, youthrally2016@wels.net.

Women's Ministry Conference—July 21–23. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis. Theme: “Mentors.” Registration is open. Website, wels.net/wmconference.

WELS Night at Miller Park—July 29. Miller Park, Milwaukee, Wis. Brewers vs. Pirates. Website, wels.net/events.

Organization of WELS Lutheran Seniors convention—Oct. 11–13. Ramada Plaza Hotel and Convention Center, Omaha, Neb. Theme: “Enlarging the Harvest.” More information and registration forms will be available in June. Website, wels.net/events.

WELS Nurses: A gathering of professionals—Oct. 22. Fox Valley area, Wis. Website, wels.net/events.

Tours of Salem Lutheran Landmark Church—

WELS congregations, schools, organizations, and individuals are invited to tour the 1863 Salem Lutheran Landmark Church and WELS Museum. WELS was founded on this site in May 1850.

Tours normally are conducted from Mar. 15 to Nov. 15. Special arrangements can be made for guests from outside the area. The Landmark Church is located at 107 St and Fond du Lac Ave, Milwaukee, Wis. To arrange a tour, contact Dr. Joel Pless, 414-443-8930, joel.pless@wlc.edu

VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

Teachers—The newly reopened East Fork Lutheran High School on the Apache mission near Whiteriver, Arizona, is looking for retired WELS educators to teach one or two high school level courses to small class sizes for the 2016-17 school year. In return, it will provide a stipend of \$4,000 per course, a fully furnished apartment on the campus, and utilities. Contact beapache@outlook.com or 928-338-4455.

Handyman—East Fork Lutheran School on the Apache mission near Whiteriver, Arizona, is looking for a volunteer handyman/woman for the 2016-17 school year. A furnished apartment and utilities will be provided. A spouse could help in the school library and assist in other ways on the mission. More details available upon request. Contact eastforkschool@gmail.com or 928-338-4455.

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

Baptized! On Christmas?

In Hong Kong, people like to be baptized on Christmas.

At first it seems a little strange. Isn't Christmas all about Jesus' birth? But think about it. God's Son becomes a living, breathing person so that people dead in sin might become children of God! Getting baptized on this day marks the birth of the Savior and the new birth of that Christian.

This Christmas, there were more than 60 new births in our Hong Kong churches. Each is a unique story. For me, two are especially touching.

A year ago our church lost a young mother after a courageous battle with leukemia. Her husband continued to bring his children to church. His mother, Mrs. Li, accompanied them sometimes, mainly to care for her granddaughters. His father wanted nothing to do with God or the church. Despite the difficulties, his mother kept coming and got involved with a ladies Bible class. God's Word is powerful.

This is what her son wrote about his mother this Christmas Day:

My mother is a strong-willed, super woman who never paid attention to God. For her to put herself aside, admit her own shortcomings, and even confess she is sinful and in need of redemption—humanly speaking, this was simply an impossible task.

However, my family and I believe God has great power. We prayed every day for my mom to believe in God. The God who hears prayer allowed a miracle to happen again today. My mother "believes and is baptized."

I talked with Mrs. Li after worship. She told me with a glowing smile that it was all God's doing. The faith and hope her daughter-in-law had showed in the face of death was a powerful testimony to God's love. Praise God for his amazing grace.

Later that same Christmas, another Chinese lady, Mandy, was baptized. Her story is unique because God used a banana peel to lead her to Christ! She got to know us through Carmen, a WELS member who teaches English in Hong Kong. One afternoon, Carmen was walking near her apartment and didn't see a rotting banana peel on the sidewalk. Down she went!

The awkward fall injured her knee. She needed to find a physical therapist, and God led her to Mandy. Carmen gradually shared her life and faith with her. Mandy had a grandma who was a Christian, but Mandy was never too interested in spiritual things. She's a triathlete who competes in Iron Man competitions—running, swimming, and biking long distances all in one day.

Mandy occasionally visited our English-speaking church, especially when there were activities. After many invita-



More than 60 people were baptized on Christmas in our churches in Hong Kong, including Mrs. Li, who started coming to church to help with her two granddaughters. **Bottom - Image removed for security concerns.**

tions, Mandy started studying the Bible with Dr. Steve Witte, president of Asia Lutheran Seminary. She studied off and on. Sometimes she got busy with competitions; other times she lost focus. A number of professors and wives reached out to her. We kept praying.

Then God used a terrorist attack in France to get her attention. Carmen and Mandy were talking about this attack and the fear it can produce. Carmen said she wasn't worried because she knew where she was going after death. That deeply struck Mandy and she asked herself, *Why am I waiting? God has prepared a place for me through Jesus. Get baptized!*

Confessing her sin and declaring her faith in Jesus as her Savior, Mandy was baptized on Christmas!

Angels rejoiced at Christ's birth! Angels rejoiced this Christmas as these two sisters were baptized. Angels are rejoicing around the world as the news of Christ's birth results in the new birth of people from every tribe and nation!

A blessed Christmas indeed!

Rob Siirila

The Spirit is working hard

Only three years ago, Peace, Aiken, S.C., was just an idea in the minds of the members of the South Atlantic District Mission Board. As Jonathan Bourman, pastor at Peace, likes to say, “The Spirit’s been working hard since then, carving out his church in Aiken.”

Bourman, his wife Melanie, and their young daughter, Elliana, arrived in Aiken in December 2013. The congregation held its official launch service in December 2014. Since his arrival and the congregation’s launch, Bourman says, “There’s been a lot of preaching, a lot of teaching, and lots of down home evangelizing. Before our eyes, we watched Peace grow from a church of just eight members to a church of 50. As a pastor, it’s been a joy to get front row seats to the Spirit’s work in all of it.”

Peace’s vision is to use its grace- and Christ-filled doctrines to establish itself as the premiere destination for gospel proclamation in the greater Aiken area.

“We have a mission burning at Peace to reach greater Aiken with the real peace that Jesus Christ gives us in his gospel,” says Bourman. “In the heart of the

Bible Belt, we have a unique opportunity to be the only thriving confessional Lutheran church within 40 miles.”

On the Sunday that Peace held its opening service, one woman noted, “Peace is a movement.” Bourman says that feeling is still with the congregation. In fact, a new member recently commented, “I am excited to see Peace be a reformation in this city.”

Bourman believes that people are coming to Peace “for our doctrine, for our sacraments, and for the living teaching of the true Word of God.” Visitors and members come from many demographic and denominational backgrounds. A well-respected local CEO, who had never previously found a church home, began studying God’s Word with Bourman. As he was teaching her about Holy Communion, her eyes filled with tears as she said, “I never knew. I never knew. Thank you for starting Peace.”

The congregation currently rents office and worship space, but as Peace moves forward with its message and its movement, it hopes to soon find a perma-



In December 2015, Peace, Aiken, S.C., celebrated the one-year anniversary of its launch. Here Jonathan Bourman, pastor at Peace, visits with one family that attended the celebration.

nent church home in downtown Aiken.

Bourman notes, “We want to be central, and we want to be magnetic. That’s what the gospel is to us, and we want to embody that for our city and our region in our ministry center.”

No matter where Peace is worshiping, though, the message will be the same. “Peace is all about the gospel,” says Bourman. “We talk about it all the time. We cling to it like barnacles to a tossing ship. It’s why we named our church ‘Peace.’ And wonderfully and mercifully, the people who are becoming a part of us are all people who love the gospel and want to hear it so badly from their pastor and their fellow members.”

Congregation Mission Offerings update

Congregation Mission Offerings (CMO) for calendar year 2015 ended the year 1.1 percent higher than 2014 gifts and 2.9 percent higher than subscriptions. Total CMO for the year was \$21.5 million, an increase of \$234,000 over the previous year. This is the highest CMO total in the synod’s history and the fourth consecutive year that congregations have exceeded their subscriptions. “We praise Jesus for providing such generous offerings through his people’s congregations!” says Kurt Lueneburg, director of the Ministry of Christian Giving.

Recently, 95 percent of WELS congregations reported their plans for 2016 CMO. While CMO subscriptions for 2016 show a decrease of 1.8 percent from 2015 actual receipts,



no reductions in ministry are necessary because of the higher than anticipated offerings in 2015.

“We thank God for the high percentage of congregations that reported subscriptions for CMO for 2016,” says Lueneburg. “We are confident that Jesus will enable our churches to exceed their subscriptions for the fifth consecutive year.”

Lueneburg says that a stable—not declining—CMO makes it possible

to maintain the present level of ministry as long as there are also many substantial special gifts from churches and individuals. While CMO has increased about 1 percent annually over the last ten years, that increase provides only one-third of the 3 percent annual increase in gifts needed for maintaining WELS’ present level of worldwide gospel outreach for Jesus. “We ask our heavenly Father to help us keep growing in the grace of giving for our local and global ministries,” he says. “This is an opportunity for each of us to dedicate to the Lord an increased level of financial support through our congregations and special gifts. To that end, God help us.”

Pro-life ministry opportunities in Bulgaria

Doing mission work in a country where one church—the Orthodox Church in Bulgaria—is considered part of the national culture produces challenges to outreach efforts. The Bulgarian Lutheran Church, our sister church in Bulgaria, is forced to look for unusual opportunities to share the gospel. One congregation in Sofia, for example, tries to reach out to retired military officers through Bible classes and movie nights held in the Retired Officers Club.

Another way the Bulgarian Lutheran Church shares the gospel is through the work of Deaconess Lyudmila Popova in the public schools. Below she shares more about her pro-life ministry in Bulgaria:

Bulgaria is facing a difficult post-communist period. The 45 years of communism and atheism are reflected in all spheres of life, including shattered hearts, families, economy, and especially moral values. Young people become sexually active and look toward the option of abortion already at the age of 13. To them, abortion is a type of birth control rather than destruction of a human life. In Bulgaria it is not possible to find any information on topics such as abortion and post-abortion syndrome. The average

rate of abortion is three or more in a lifetime.

Because of all the above, I was called by the Bulgarian Lutheran Church in 2001 to serve as deaconess and start a pro-life ministry. I do seminars and presentations in schools and summer youth camps. The goal is to reach the young people to educate them, to protect their health, to save the life of the unborn babies, and to share the gospel when it is possible. Presentations include two short films: *The Living Proof* about embryo development and *The Silent Scream* about abortion. My talks include discussions on how and when life starts, what abortion is and how the baby reacts during an abortion, the consequences of abortion, and that sex is not a game.

The young people are impressed. Most had never considered that the tiny thing in the womb is a real, living human being. Sometimes students approach me after a presentation and tell me that they will never allow an abortion in their lives.

Learn about another unique outreach opportunity for the Bulgarian Lutheran Church—reaching out to the Roma (gypsies)—on p. 28.



Deaconess Lyudmila Popova presents seminars in schools and summer youth camps as part of her pro-life ministry in Bulgaria.

One in Christ —UPDATE—



The 2015 synod convention launched the “One in Christ” debt elimination offering through June 2016 to eliminate the remaining \$4.7 million synod debt. If successful by God’s gracious blessing, the “One in Christ” campaign will put our synod in a better financial position to continue the ministry of training workers and establishing missions at home and abroad.

Congregations are stepping up to this opportunity. “When One in Christ was presented to the members of St. Paul in Lake Mills, Wisconsin, several members provided a matching gift to encourage others to bring offerings of at least \$20,000,” says Gerry Heckmann, member at St. Paul and WELS Christian giving counselor. “By the Holy Spirit, that goal will be accomplished through commitments fulfilled by June 30.”

Kurt Lueneburg, director of the Ministry of Christian Giving, says, “We praise Jesus for all the congregations and individuals who have already honored the Lord with an offering to ‘One in Christ!’”

Learn more about how you can help at wels.net/oneinchrist.

Men's ministry on the move

Russ Wagner and Dave Bunnaw are part of a long-time morning Bible study group at Bethany, Appleton, Wis. Once, after attending a nondenominational men's conference, they came away thinking, *We could really use something like this.* "After a little research, we realized that there was no WELS ministry we could find that was focused specifically on men, so we decided to give it a shot," says Wagner.

They, along with fellow members of their small group, started Men of His Word with the vision to gather Christian men together around God's Word to consider the blessings, challenges, and opportunities in their lives and to empower and equip them to carry out their God-given mission in their homes, churches, communities, and the world. The seventh annual conference, "Stand Firm," was held this past February in Oshkosh, Wis. The eight-hour day includes opening and closing devotions around a keynote address and breakout sessions on 20 different topics.

"It has been our experience that bringing men together to study and discuss their issues in the light of God's Word has a tremendous impact on their faith life," says Wagner. "We try to offer a wide variety of topics to reach men at all stages of life. We are willing to address head-on thorny issues such as pornography; addiction; depression; forgiveness; loss; homosexuality; post-traumatic stress disorder; and men's roles in family, church, and society."

The first Men of His Word conference had 220 participants. This year 550 men attended. Most are from across Wisconsin, while some are from as far away as Arizona.

Derek Campbell took a group connected with a Bible study for dads that he leads at St. John, Wauwatosa, Wis. "There are so many different takes by so many different men on ways to live a God-pleasing life as a Christian father," he says. "I come back with this whole refreshed approach to my time in God's Word and things I can do for the dad's group and board of outreach. These guys have such strong conviction of faith that it's just invigorating."

Mark Groth of Loving Shepherd, Milwaukee, Wis., says, "You're not alone. You're in this together. You're here to support each other. God wants us to support each other. That's why I go. It really rejuvenates you."

Another group of six came from Christ, Pewaukee, Wis. Tom Engelbrecht, pastor of assimilation, attended for the first time. He said, "Probably the biggest blessing was just seeing so many men gathered in one place to grow in their faith. That's not something you see every day. That alone was very encouraging."



Top: More than five hundred men attended the Men of His Word conference in Appleton, Wis., to grow in the Word. Bottom: About 170 men attended another men's rally, Men Alive!, in Bay City, Michigan, in February. The rally focused on Joshua 1:9 and featured presenters highlighting how to be strong and courageous in the Lord through all situations.

The conference itself is just the start. "Keeping the momentum going after the conference has always been a concern," says Wagner. For this reason, the conference planners record sessions and post them to their website with study guides. They also encourage attendees to remain in the Word personally and to start or join local Bible studies (one of the topics for the breakout sessions is how to start a Bible study group). Men have done this locally as well as regionally by working with Men of His Word to organize additional men's conferences in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Minnesota. "Over the last year we have had at least three more locations with men interested in developing men's ministry events," says Wagner.

Through the sharing of the gospel and the working of the Holy Spirit, God is blessing these efforts. This year's Men of His Word conference was another success. "On the car ride back, everyone is like, 'What did you see? What did you cover and learn about?'" says Campbell. "It's just awesome. It's so much fun."

Adam Goede

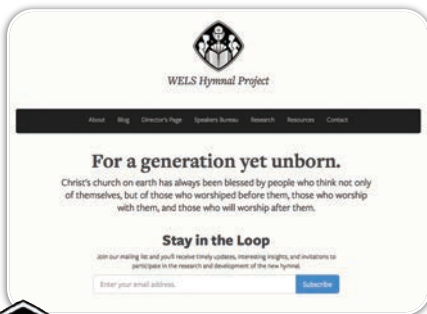
Learn more about Men of His Word at www.menofhisword.org.

WELS news briefs

COMMISSION ON WORSHIP

contact@welshymnal.com

The **WELS Hymnal Project** released a comprehensive update in February on its work of producing a new hymnal. The full report can be found at www.welshymnal.com.



More than 60 volunteers—pastors, teachers, and laypeople—form seven different committees in the WELS Hymnal Project that focus on the following areas: hymns, psalms, rites, occasional services, Scripture, technology, and communication. By this fall some materials will be ready for field testing by congregations. The WELS Hymnal Project is looking at a release date for the new hymnal in the early 2020s.

CONFERENCE OF PRESIDENTS

414-256-3202; president@wels.net

Due to Nebraska District President Earle Treptow taking a call to Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis., Phil Hirsch, pastor at Hope, Manhattan, Kan., is serving as the **interim district president** until delegates elect a new president at the district convention this June. Joel Zank, president of the Northern Wisconsin District, was appointed to replace Treptow as a Conference of Presidents' representative on the Synodical Council.

Preparing students for the public ministry

The mission of Michigan Lutheran Seminary (MLS), Saginaw, Mich., is to prepare high school students for the public ministry of the gospel. Currently 58 of its graduates are attending Martin Luther College (MLC), New Ulm, Minn., and studying to be called workers. Here you can meet two 2015 graduates, Brittany Boyd and Anne Russell, who share some of their thoughts on MLS, MLC, and the goal of serving as WELS teachers.

BRITTANY BOYD

Home congregation: Christ, Oakley, Mich.

On why she attended MLS: "It looked like a place where I could be part of this amazing family. Every time I visited MLS, I fell more in love with the campus and teachers."

On how MLS prepared her for MLC:

"The Bible courses at MLS fully prepared me for my Bible classes here at MLC. Throughout my sport team experience at MLS, I learned teamwork and how to set a goal and accomplish it. Throughout my theater and music experience, I learned how to be myself and see the world from someone else's point of view. From all my classes, I learned good examples of teaching for myself in the future."

On becoming a teacher: "I have known since third grade that I wanted to be a teacher. All of the teachers at MLS were great examples of called workers, and I strive to be like them one day. After my junior year, I had the privilege to travel to Colombia, South America, through Project Titus. There is when I fell in love with Spanish and the Latin American culture. That is when I knew I wanted to major in Spanish at MLC."

Advice for students considering attending MLS:

"Do it! MLS is such a great place to grow up at. You learn so many life lessons. You will make so many friends and memories. Get ready to be part of a family!"



Brittany Boyd (left) and Anne Russell

ANNE RUSSELL

Home congregation: Emanuel First, Lansing, Mich.

On why she attended MLS: "My decision to go to MLS came very late in my grade school years. I think my biggest influence to go was that I had a lot of friends who would be attending, and I was drawn to the family atmosphere."

On her decision to attend MLC: "I have always wanted to be a teacher, but I struggled for a long time with the idea of attending MLC. I think what finally gave me the push I needed was a Project Titus trip to St. Marcus, Milwaukee, Wis., to help out in their urban summer school. After that small taste I was hooked on urban education and knew that MLC would be my best option for one day, God willing, entering into an urban ministry field."

On what she appreciates most about MLS: "One of the biggest blessings is the family atmosphere. Among students and faculty you can always find someone to mentor you and who is there to help. I have memories and friends from MLS that I know I will never lose."

"I would like to thank everyone at MLS for all that they did and continue to do to support me and prepare me for my future ministry, and I would like to encourage any students there now not to shut down the idea of MLC. I almost did, and now I consider it one of my greatest blessings."

Learn more about Michigan Lutheran Seminary at www.mlsem.org.



District news

SOUTHEASTERN WISCONSIN

On March 11–13, Shoreland Lutheran High School, Somers, Wis., hosted the **WELS East Regional Band Festival**.

WESTERN WISCONSIN

Lakeside Lutheran High School, Lake Mills, Wis., hosted the **WELS West Regional Band Festival** on March 11–13.

HAPPY ANNIVERSARY!

AZ-CA—On Jan. 31, **Shepherd of the Mountains, Reno, Nev.**, celebrated its 40th anniversary.

The district reporters for this month are: **AZ-CA**—Michael Schroeder; **NA**—Philip Gurgel; **SEW**—Scott Oelhafen; **WW**—Brett Brauer.

SOUTHEASTERN WISCONSIN



On Feb. 12, Shoreland Lutheran High School, Somers, Wis., hosted Night to Shine, a prom night experience centered on God's love for people with special needs ages 16 and older. Fifty percent of Shoreland's student body volunteered to help with the event, which was created and sponsored by the Tim Tebow Foundation. Many of Shoreland's students were paired up as "buddies" to help the honored guests. More than one hundreds adults from congregations in Shoreland's federation also helped. Information was shared about local Jesus Cares events and worship opportunities. Jesus Cares Ministries, a ministry of The Lutheran Home Association that assists congregations and schools in reaching out to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families, provided training for those who volunteered. Pictured are a group of Night to Shine guests and their "buddies" taking a limo ride on their special night.

NORTH ATLANTIC



The Asian outreach group at Our Savior's, East Brunswick, N.J., held its fifth annual Lunar New Year celebration in February. The group also is planning a multi-ethnic vacation Bible school and youth campout.

Obituaries

Karen Schwalbe, 1943–2015

Karen Schwalbe (Zehms) was born Feb. 26, 1943, in Manitowoc, Wis. She died Aug. 28, 2015, in Milwaukee, Wis.

A 1965 graduate of Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn., she served Zion, Columbus, Wis., and Redemption, Milwaukee, Wis.

She is survived by one brother and two sisters.

Janet M. Plaster, 1943–2015

Janet Plaster was born Jan. 21, 1943, in Stillwater, Minn. She died Nov. 2, 2015, in Maplewood, Minn.

A 1965 graduate of Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn., she served Our Savior, Pomona, Calif., and Bethel, Bay City, Mich.

She was preceded in death by one brother. She is survived by three sisters and one brother.

Elaine E. Moldenhauer, 1926–2015

Elaine Moldenhauer (née Rademan) was born Apr. 20, 1926, in Oconomowoc, Wis. She died Dec. 21, 2015, in Milwaukee, Wis.

A 1947 graduate of Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn., she served St. John, Wrightstown, Wis.; Trinity, Marinette, Wis.; Grace, Oshkosh, Wis.; Trinity, Neenah, Wis.; Riverview, Appleton, Wis.; and St. John, Watertown, Wis.

She was preceded in death by her husband, Robert. She is survived by 2 sons, 1 daughter, 7 grandchildren, 12 great-grandchildren, 1 brother, and 1 sister.

Gerald C. Steffenhagen, 1945–2016

Gerald Steffenhagen was born Dec. 5, 1945, in Red Wing, Minn. He died Jan 2, 2016, in Cottage Grove, Minn.

A 1967 graduate of Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn., he taught at Christ, Saginaw, Mich., and St. John, Wood Lake, Minn.

He was preceded in death by two brothers. He is survived by his wife, Jocelyn; one son; three daughters; eight grandchildren; and one sister.



Unexpected Love

Jesus turns the sorrow and confusion of Mary Magdalene into joy and hope. Theodore J. Hartwig

Among the best known paintings of Jesus' resurrection is the one of Mary Magdalene meeting with Jesus at the empty tomb. Mary Magdalene became a popular figure in the Middle Ages. In the gospel of Luke (8:2,3) she is described as having been freed from seven demons and as one of the women who supported Jesus "out of their own means." Although it is not certain, many adopted the belief that Jesus had rescued her from a flagrantly sinful life. If she could be delivered from evil, then there was hope for even the worst sin-

ners. So she became a popular subject in painting and sculpture. In recent years she again has become a popular subject of attention, this time in such profane productions as *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *The Last Temptation of Jesus*, and *The Da Vinci Code*.

Mary Magdalene was one of the women who stood near the cross during the last hours of Jesus' life (Matthew 27:55,56). She was with the other women—including Mary the mother of James (the other Mary), Salome, and Joanna—who made their

Then the disciples went back to where they were staying.

Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned to him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher").

Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' "

Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord." And she told them that he had said these things to her.

—John 20:10-18

way to the tomb early on Easter morning with their spices to anoint the body of Jesus (Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:1-3; Luke 24:1,10).

These accounts of the resurrection include Mary, but John's account features Mary prominently. The resurrection of Jesus was an astonishing event to the women and to the disciples of Jesus. The eyewitness accounts of that unusual morning reveal the shock and confusion that the Lord's resurrection caused. We have to compare and combine all the gospel accounts to get the entire picture.

MARY'S IMPORTANT DISCOVERY

John puts Mary Magdalene at the tomb, but this is the second time she has been at the tomb on Easter morning. She had come with the other women when they found that the stone had been rolled away. She might have jumped to the conclusion that the body of Jesus had been stolen, quickly left the other women, and ran to tell Simon Peter and the other disciples: "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!" (John 20:2). Peter and John ran to the tomb to verify her news. Mary slowly followed them back to the tomb. It seems she arrived after Peter and John looked inside, saw the grave clothes, and left the tomb.

Mary stood outside the tomb crying. Still thinking the body of Jesus had been snatched during the night, she even took a look inside. She saw the place where the body of Jesus had been. There John tells us were two angels—one at the head and one at the foot where Jesus had been. They asked Mary why she was crying. Mary's mind was so focused on one thing she couldn't imagine anything else. She said, "They have taken my Lord away and I don't know where they have put him" (v. 13). It was not a question but, for her, a statement of fact.

She turned away from the angels inside the tomb before they could offer

any different explanation. Then she saw Jesus, but in her tears and anguish she did not recognize him. She assumed he was a gardener, perhaps employed by wealthy Joseph of Arimathea. After all, it was in his new and unused tomb they had laid the dead body of Jesus three days earlier (Matthew 27:57-61). She pleaded, "Tell me where you have put him, and I will get him." A gardener of Joseph might know.

One word from Jesus broke through the fog of her despair: "Mary."

One word from Jesus broke through the fog of her despair: "Mary." John makes it clear that Jesus said her name the way it was pronounced in their mother tongue (Aramaic)—Miriam. This no doubt had a familiar, informal ring to it. It was the way family and friends would address her. In our setting today, it would be like saying "Annie" instead of "Ann." His "Miriam" led to immediate recognition from Mary.

Joy. Surprise. Relief. All these things suddenly changed her attitude. She recognized her teacher, Lord, and Savior: "Rabboni." As John explains in the text, *Rabboni* is the word for teacher in the Aramaic language—an informal term of respect instead of the more formal *Rabbi*, my dear teacher.

By trying to clasp Jesus' knees, Mary assumed that the old teacher-disciple companionship had been restored. But Jesus directed her thought to a different relationship by saying, "Do not hold on to me." This is one of two key expressions in this story. Jesus is telling Mary that the temporal relationship of the past will be exchanged for a more

intimate spiritual relationship in the future. With this new spiritual union Mary would no longer take hold of Jesus outwardly with her hands. Far better, he would be grasped inwardly by faith. He would live in Mary and she in him.

MARY'S IMPORTANT MESSAGE

In the other significant expression of the story, Jesus gave Mary a message to bring to his disciples. Peter and John had been at the empty tomb before Mary arrived, but, in another example of God's choosing the unexpected, a woman would be one of the first heralds of the resurrection.

In Mary's message to the disciples, Jesus called them "my brothers." Thereby he assured them that the old teacher-pupil relationship had been replaced by a new more closely-knit brother relationship. They had sat for three years at the feet of the Master Teacher. But now they would be personal witnesses of his resurrected body. They would receive the fullness of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The years of their preparation were finished. As Jesus' brothers they would be fully qualified to serve as the foundation of the New Testament church, "with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone" (Ephesians 2:20). All of this is embraced in the new name of *brothers* which Jesus gave his disciples. And as beneficiaries of this new relationship, they were assured that their Lord and Master would always be with them in their exalted ministry, even to the end of the world.

Theodore Hartwig, professor emeritus at Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minnesota, is a member at St. John, New Ulm.

This is the final article in a four-part series on the gems of John.



Missionaries

Grace among Europe's most mistreated

John F. Vogt

"The knowledge of God—for me this is the best thing that has come since the fall of communism. Living a life without God is worse than living a life like a beggar." This is how Iliyan Itsov, a pastor in the Bulgarian Lutheran Church, answered the question: What good has come since the fall of Communism?

Itsov, who is a Roma (a.k.a. gypsy), says his first contact with the saving gospel came through the efforts of a WELS missionary. "In 1998 my father met a man from the USA named John Roebke. The purpose of the meeting was to ask [Roebke's] help in getting textbooks for our village school. When they met, my father found out that he was a Lutheran missionary. This man came to our house and asked us if we wanted some Bible lessons. We agreed. I learned about Jesus, and my family and I became Christians. My life became calmer and easier. The Lord blessed me."

The Lord's blessings continued. "My father asked Missionary Roebke to help him start a church in our village," says Itsov. "After a year of Bible lessons, the missionary baptized 50 Roma people in one service." During the time Roebke served the congregation, the weekly attendance grew to about 150 people.

Itsov describes what it's like to be a gypsy: "The Roma people in Europe today are treated generally as in the past—like people who don't deserve to exist. No matter what kind of school degree a person has or how much knowledge he or she has, that person will be treated as something less than others if the color of the skin is darker or somebody recognizes him or her as a gypsy. Sometimes we need to deny our ethnicity in order to find any job."

The impression is that Roma people are always moving from place to place. However, "nowadays the Roma people are part of the societies of the countries, living there and having houses. Their reason for migrating today is economical. . . .

Most of the families in my town have one, if not more, of their family working outside of Bulgaria. My mother, for example, has worked for eight years in Italy."

Itsov prepared for the ministry through training provided by WELS in coordination with St. Sophia Lutheran Seminary in Ukraine. He was ordained in September 2015. He tells of difficulties he encountered along the way: "I was in seventh grade and wanted to continue my high school education in the *Gymnasium for Foreign Languages*. One of my teachers said that she would do everything to prevent my study in that school (in those times, no Roma children were students there). She gave me low marks, but I managed to pass the entrance exams. I became the first Roma in that school. My schoolmates didn't know that I was Roma until one of the mothers told her son. When he told the others, they stopped having any contact with me, which made me angry, so I doubled my efforts to show them that I can study better than they. My father and my mother became unemployed in 1995 when I started high school, and it was a great challenge to finish because of the fees. But thanks to my grandfather, I managed to graduate third in my class."

Itsov credits Missionary Roebke with helping him get into the university. Through his education and work experiences, Itsov has learned to speak ten languages—a unique qualification for the call he has now been given by the Board for World Missions.

Itsov was called to coordinate a new mission project called Outreach to Roma (OTR). It's an effort to share the gospel with the western world's most mistreated ethnic group, a group numbering about 10 million people who are scattered all across Europe. "The fact that I am a Roma makes me uniquely suited because I know the psychology of the gypsies," says Itsov. "I think it will be easier for them to listen to me than to a nongypsy."

However, even for a Roma like himself, the work is challenging: "There are still prejudices," says Itsov. "If I need somebody [who is not Roma] to help me in my outreach work, it is hard to get him to agree. Working

with Roma people is also a great challenge because they find it hard to trust you.”

OTR is now working in three villages near Itsov's home. “An average of 30 people from those villages are transported each week to services,” he says. “I have also located interested individuals in two other Bulgarian cities where I hope to begin serving. The translation of *The Promise* in Romani is done and about to be published.”

Itsov is married and has two children. “My family supports me now,” he says. “In the beginning it was hard for them. We had problems with my traveling [to Ukraine for pastoral training], but through the years they have come to understand that this work is important.”

Itsov's travel continues. He has been asked by WELS sister churches in Sweden and Ger-

many to help them reach Roma workers and immigrants in their countries. That could be just the beginning. “My plans are simple—to spread the gospel wherever possible. I don't want to segregate the project only in Bulgaria. I have great opportunities also in Romania, Hungary, Macedonia, Spain, Italy, France, and even England. A lot of effort will be needed to do all this, but I will not give up.”

Itsov has found another man willing to help. “I am working with Sorin-Horia Trifa. He served as a preacher in the liberal Lutheran Church, but his understandings are confessional. So the idea of a Confessional Lutheran Church in Romania is his. Right now we are registering with the government, and Sorin is looking for a house to rent near the biggest gypsy neighborhood, where we could meet and where I can stay while in Romania. I expect and pray that, by the time you read this, we will have started work in Bucharest. Please pray for the project and the Roma people.”

John Vogt is WELS regional coordinator for Eastern Europe.

Editor's note: April 8 is International Roma Day, a day to remember the killing of thousands of gypsies in World War II's holocaust and to raise awareness of the continuing difficulties Roma people face.

The church council at the Roma congregation in the village of Dunavtsi; Iliyan Itsov's family at Iliyan's ordination in September 2015: wife Kirilka, Iliyan, son Lyuboslav, daughter Proletka, and father Boykov. Boykov is studying to be an evangelist in order to help Iliyan with reaching out to the Roma; worship in Dunavtsi. While this congregation has been around since the late 1990s, 30 Roma from three other villages are now traveling there for worship through Outreach to Roma; the six pastors in the Bulgarian Lutheran Church at Itsov's ordination: (left to right) Ivo Rusinov, Iliyan Itsov, Strahil Naydenov, Radoslav Radkov, Dimitar Shishkov, and Todor Gonchovsk.

BULGARIAN LUTHERAN CHURCH

Year mission work began: 1994

Baptized members: 155

Average weekly attendance at worship: 94

Congregations: 4

National pastors: 6

Pastoral students: 3

Resident missionaries: 0

Unique fact: Pastor Radoslav Radkov, the leader of the BLC, is perhaps the only pastor of our fellowship to have had a face-to-face meeting in Rome with the Pope. Rado was one of eight Catholic youth invited for a 20-minute audience with Pope John Paul II in 1997, soon after Communism fell.





Lean on GOD

Instead of questioning God's will when tough times hit, we need to turn all things over to the One who already has won heaven for us.

Christine Rindfleisch

If you watch children out on a playground, you may hear one of them shout, "It's not fair." If you were to listen in on a family squabble between two siblings fighting over who got the bigger piece of pie, you may hear the words again.

Unfortunately, this immature behavior follows us into our adult years. The will of God is difficult for us to understand. Why does he seem so unfair? We are unable to comprehend the ways of an infinite God with our finite minds. So how do Christians submit to the will of God when our sinful natures tell us, "It's not fair"?

Fair means to be just, equitable, or honest. No one is capable of perfectly following through with these qualities because our sinful natures get in the

way. Sin has infected us, and all our seemingly righteous acts are corrupt. We fall into the trap of believing that we have control over the outcomes in our lives based on what we do. Life seems fair when that happens. But when life seems to be dishing out unfair treatment, we are quick to point fingers. When the life-altering challenges happen, we ask God why he would allow such things to happen.

When we question the will of God, we are reverting back to our childish behavior on the playground and basically telling God that we think he is not fair. But who are we to question a perfectly just God? God did not promise that life would be fair according to our idea of equality. However, God did promise that he will always be there in times of trouble.

COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS

My husband and I recently had a lesson of our own regarding control. This past June, we heard the news that no one wants to hear: "Sir, I'm sorry to tell you, but you have cancer."

Oh, the emotions and questions that flashed through our minds. How bad is it? Is chemotherapy necessary? How will we pay for this? How do we tell the kids? What did I do to get this disease? What didn't I do that I got this disease? How many tumors? Did it metastasize? Is it curable?

Then came the question, "God, why is this happening to us?" Notice what happened. We initially thought about all of the things we could do to gain control of the situation. Once we realized that we did not have control,

we questioned God. It seemed that God became the problem when we lost control.

We soon realized that we needed to push all of these earthly worries aside; all that we truly needed was God. He is the one in control and has promised to work all things for the good of those who love him, according to his purpose.

Cancer taught us that we have a long road ahead, but we are confident in God's plan for us. We have been blessed beyond measure in so many ways. God's providence became apparent in the people and circumstances that God prepared to help us handle this terrible time in our lives. We are able to look beyond the cancer and see what God has set in place for us. People who are able to help. Self-sufficient children. Short-term disability at work. Skilled doctors. Summers off from teaching. Family that lives nearby.

God provides and continues to bless his people. "Call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me" (Psalm 50:15). "Deliver us" does not necessarily mean that my husband will be cured, but God already delivered us from sin and eternal death. The more we focus on heavenly things, the easier it becomes to put our trust and hope in Jesus and turn all things over to him. We find peace and confidence in knowing that although we are in the midst of a battle on earth, Christ has won the ultimate battle for us. That's what matters.

GOD'S LOVE IS UNCONDITIONAL

Do I think a cancer diagnosis isn't fair? Not really. I'll tell you what's not fair. We have a God that loves us unconditionally. He chases after us even though we continually turn our backs on him. When we don't get our way,



The Rindfleisch family

we doubt his will for us. We deny him when we are pressed by unbelievers. And yet he still loves us.

Do you know what else is not fair? The fact that Jesus died for every single one of our sins although he lived a perfect life and did not deserve the punishment. It's just not fair that he should take our punishment for us.

We pulled into the parking garage, turned off the engine, held hands, and read our wedding verse: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!"

I always thought that testing faith meant that God allows something to happen to us so that he can see if we will remain faithful. It took a crisis for me to see that God allows things to happen to us so we have the opportunity to test our own faith. He knows if the life events will make us or break us well before the situation happens. We have the option to turn to God when we are in trouble or turn away from him. I do have many times

when I feel distraught over the thought of living this life without my husband or envisioning my children living without their father. But as hard and painful as it is, I am sure that God will get us through any situation. His will is for us to come to him. He is always there, waiting, with his arms wide open.

What good can come from cancer? It drew my husband and me closer to God and closer to each other. It made

us see all of the earthly blessings that we took for granted because we were too busy wishing for more. Knowing that we do not have control over cancer showed us that God is in control and his ways are best.

On the day of the first appointment with the oncologist, we brought God with us as we began this new journey. We pulled into the parking garage, turned off the engine, held hands, and read our wedding verse: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:4-7). We entered that office knowing that the two of us did not have to go through this alone. We trust in God's promise that he will never leave us or forsake us.

During our darkest times, when we thought we couldn't handle it anymore, we have learned to lean on God. He is the only one who can calm our fears, give us strength, and fill us with his peace.

Christine Rindfleisch is a teacher and a member at St. John, Wauwatosa, Wisconsin.

Time to think

Andrew C. Schroer

As we seek to
speak the truth in
love, wisdom says
wait. It's okay to
say, "I'm thinking
it over."

My mom texted me the other day. For most people, this statement is neither shocking nor extraordinary. Millions of mothers text their children every day.

I, however, was shocked. Let's just say my parents have never been at the vanguard of technology. In fact, I still remember when my father was dragged, kicking and screaming, into the world of e-mail 20 years ago.

"It allows people to respond too quickly," he complained.

My father made a rule for himself. If he received an emotionally charged e-mail, he would write a response but not send it for 24 hours. Sometimes, after thinking about it, he would edit what he wrote. Other times, he wouldn't even send the e-mail. His rule was not to respond for 24 hours.

"They can wait," he told me as I rolled my eyes.

I recently read an article by Alan Jacobs, a professor at Wheaton College, about the demands of social media. In the article he referenced the old Jack Benny radio show. One of Jack Benny's classic routines featured him being robbed by a mugger. Now, you need to understand that Jack Benny's character was infamous for his stinginess. In the skit, the mugger pulls out a gun. "Your money or your life," he demands. Jack Benny stands frozen in silence. "I said, 'Your money or your life,'" the mugger growls impatiently. "I'm thinking it over," Jack Benny whines, as the audience roars with laughter.

Jacobs equates the Internet to the mugger. But instead of demanding money, it demands our attention and reaction . . . and it wants them right now. "I'm thinking it over" is not an acceptable answer.

Our world wants, expects, and demands an instantaneous response. The responses are often unmeasured, emotional, or uninformed. I have counseled numerous couples whose problems and arguments have escalated through the heated exchange of text messages.

I recently participated in a Facebook thread in which people immediately disparaged a new church because, in the posted pictures, the sanctuary had no altar or cross. It was later discovered that the pictures were taken before the cross and altar were installed.

The problem is that once words are said, once a post is shared, once you hit send, the damage is done. A wise man once told me that words are like toothpaste. Once it's out of the tube, you can't put it back in.

So what's the answer? Should we never text? Should we never tweet? Should we never post or respond on Facebook? I don't think that's the answer. Social media is a part of the world in which we live. It can be a wonderful tool to share and communicate.

In the end, however, my father was right. Wisdom says wait. James put it this way, "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry" (James 1:19).

If you are texting with someone and the conversation turns emotional or confrontational, type your response, but then wait five minutes, a half hour, or even an hour to hit send. Or better yet, wait until you can speak with the person face to face.

If you have something controversial or provocative you feel you need to share on Facebook or Twitter, make sure you have all the facts first. It won't hurt to wait a day or two. After some time thinking about it, you may decide it's not even worth sharing.

As we seek to speak the truth in love, wisdom says wait. It's okay to say, "I'm thinking it over." Measure your words. Get all the facts. Take your time.

They can wait.

Contributing editor Andrew Schroer is pastor at Redeemer, Edna, Texas.



Whether we
want to admit
it or not,
every day is a
day closer to
the end of
our days.

You haven't changed a bit!

Life takes us on different paths, and sometimes those paths recross after a few years. Then we see the faces and eyes of former friends we respect and care about. After looks of recognition and warm smiles, one or the other says, "You haven't changed a bit." We sometimes respond, "Neither have you." Sometimes those comments cannot stand the test of truth. Instead, it's wishful thinking or a sincere compliment that comes close to meaning, "It's so good to see you."

It's different than seeing someone daily or even looking at ourselves in the mirror every day. We don't notice the little changes that take place. The person staring back is the same person who was there yesterday and the day before. But seeing someone after a long absence is different. That person is the same person, but at the same time that person is not the same. Paths lead through time, and time changes us all.

We might hold on to the illusion that we haven't changed a bit, but, if you want a dose of reality, jar your memory with photos taken a few years ago. I've done it. I can do that because it's been a few years since I was a young father and pastor. Looking at the photos, I become aware that I've changed. Go back and look at your own pictures. It doesn't have to be a long time ago. Just a few years. It's not an exercise only for senior citizens.

Whether we admit it or not, we don't think the way we used to either. Life has brought lessons that altered the way we look at things. But the daily, monthly, and annual lessons somehow get mixed into the large pot of our experiences. We taste the new ingredients, but the soup remains pretty much the same.

So we change. We don't always notice until we try to match our youthful memories with the faces that have

grown old over the years. Maybe it's just that we get too busy with life that we don't notice the changes. Maybe it's because we don't want to admit we are changing and growing older. Maybe it's a bit of both.

Whether we want to admit it or not, every day is a day closer to the end of our days. The faces we see—our own and those we care about—are all headed in the same direction. We can't change that stark—and sometimes harsh—reality. Is it possible that we are so busy denying the end of our lives that when we think about it we somehow think life will go on just as it has? We won't change a bit; we'll just go on.

Not so, of course. But that's why Easter is so important. Here on Earth, we change, grow old, and eventually are included in the obituaries. Medical science may cure diseases but cannot cure death. But because of Jesus we have a cure for death. He willingly died to bring us forgiveness and peace with God. But he did not stay dead. He rose and promised that because he lives so will we (John 14:19). That's our hope, based on the empty tomb and the words of the One who overcame death.

And change. Think about the promise we have about how we will change. We will rise from our graves, and Jesus "by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body" (Philippians 3:21).

Then we can say, "You have changed for the better."

GREAT STORIES OF THE BIBLE

DANIEL AND THE LIONS' DEN Joel S. Heckendorf

"God bless our native land. Firm may she ever stand."

A Massachusetts native penned those words in 1835. But the words are a free translation of an 1815 German song. Apparently, the tune was first sung in England in 1740. In between, it was used for political songs in Denmark, France, Austria, and Russia. So which "native land" is God supposed to bless?

When we hear *Daniel*, a word association game may follow up with the words *lions* or *prayer*. Certainly those are major themes of this popular story (Daniel chapter 6). But don't miss how Daniel was a blessing for the governments—yes, governments—he served.

Showing leadership potential at a young age, Daniel was ripped away from his country to serve a king hundreds of miles away. Instead of kicking and screaming, he served the king and was a blessing for a government that threw his God-fearing friends into a fiery furnace and that consulted sorcerers and astrologers.

When that Babylonian government was overthrown by the Persians 60 years later, Daniel didn't protest, "I'm too old to help." He didn't grumble, "I don't have enough energy to learn this new Medes and Persians system." No. He served. He served so exceptionally that the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom.

This month, we have an obligation to pay taxes to our government. While grateful for our government, our gratitude is often challenged. It's especially challenging when a government makes decisions and implements laws that don't always reflect God's will for our lives. What should we do when some laws make it more difficult to be honest about what God's Word says? God gives us an option, "Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile" (Jeremiah 29:7). In other words, as you live in "Babylon," continue to be faithful to your God and show your love for "Babylon."

That's what Daniel did. "He was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent" (Daniel 6:4). He was a blessing to those around him. He let his light shine. His light was faithful, diligent service to his adopted country. He made enemies; they tried to destroy him in the lion's den. But his light also caused some to notice his faith and his God. Darius even issued a decree saying that "in every part of my kingdom people must fear and reverence the God of Daniel" (Daniel 6:26).

Perhaps it's not the main point of the story. But as you pay your taxes this month, may the story of Daniel lead you to wrestle with these thoughts: How can I be a blessing to those in authority? How can my deeds lead others to glorify God?

EXPLORING THE WORD

1. Tell the story in your own words. Then read the account. Which details did you omit or mistakenly add?
2. Why do you think this story is one of the most popular stories included in children's Bibles?
3. Agree or disagree: We encourage too much time to be spent with fellow Christians instead of letting our light shine for others.
4. Name at least three lessons you can learn about prayer from Daniel's example?

Contributing editor Joel Heckendorf is pastor at Immanuel, Greenville, Wisconsin.



This is the fifth article in a ten-part series on the top ten stories included in children's Bibles and how they apply to our lives today. Find answers online after April 5 at wels.net/forwardinchrist.

Because Jesus has risen from the dead, death no longer is a dead end.

Steven L. Lange

Margaret. Will. Evelyn. Clarence. These are just some of the names of the people whose graves I have stood over during the 17 years I have been blessed to serve as a pastor.

TEAR-FILLED JOURNEYS

I still can remember every journey to the cemetery. I remember how it was pouring down rain when I accompanied Sharon's family to the cemetery. I remember what a beautiful spring day it was when I stood with Helen's family at the cemetery.

I remember the tears. I remember the tears shed over a godly woman who had faithfully served her Savior for decades. I remember the tears shed over a baptized child of God whom God took to himself after only one month of service here on earth. It's impossible to make these journeys to the cemetery without tears. Even Jesus wept at the tomb of his friend Lazarus.

Yet, what I remember most about these many journeys to the cemetery is not the weather or the tears. What I remember most is that even as we traveled to this place filled with death, we had hope.

JOURNEYS FILLED WITH HOPE

This hope comes, ironically enough, from a tomb. It comes from Jesus' tomb. As the women made their way to Jesus' tomb early on that first Easter morning, they did not understand it yet. After all, they were not traveling to Jesus' tomb to greet their risen Lord. They were going to finish anointing his dead body so that he could remain buried there in peace.

But when they arrived at Jesus' tomb, they found not his lifeless body but an angel who told them that Jesus was alive. Then, as they ran back to Jerusalem, Jesus himself met them. They saw with their own eyes their risen Savior. They felt with their own hands his resurrected body. The angel at Jesus' tomb had told them the truth. Jesus truly was alive!

During the next 40 days, as they listened to the risen Jesus explain the Scriptures to them, the women and Jesus' other disciples began to understand what Jesus' resurrection meant for them. One of the things it meant was that they had hope. Because Jesus had risen from the dead, death no longer was a dead end for them. No, Jesus' promise to them was true:

"Because I live, you also will live" (John 14:19). And when they stood by the graves of their loved ones, they had no need to despair. No, Jesus meant what he said when he told Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die" (John 11:25,26).

This is the hope of all God's people whenever they must journey to the cemetery. Even in this place of death, we have hope, because Jesus is alive. One day, I will again see Margaret, Will, Evelyn, Clarence, and every other child of God whose graves I have stood next to over the years. And together we will rejoice with all God's children in that great reunion that Jesus' resurrection guarantees for us.

This hope does not remove all our tears as we bid farewell to our loved ones. But it does soften the sorrow with expectant joy. For we know that in Christ, our loved ones live even now. For all who live and believe in Jesus never die.

Steven Lange is pastor at Hope, Louisville, Kentucky.

Even in this place of death, we have hope because Jesus is alive.



Hope in a
CEMETERY