



# DISTRICT NEWS

## MINNESOTA SOUTH

### TALKING POINTS WITH PASTOR



Getty Images

# Ministry in a negative world



**Rev. Dr. Lucas Woodford**  
District President

**“Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life”** (Rev. 2:10b).

The apostle John heard these words of Jesus to the church of Smyrna in a heavenly vision. They are a call to faithfulness amid a culture hostile to faith. They are fitting words for Christians of all times, but certainly for us. At all times we are called to discipleship — to repent of our sins and to live out our faith according to our daily stations of life.

In other words, faithfulness is never static. Faith is always in motion. Faith, says Martin Luther in his preface to his commentary on Romans, is a living, busy, active thing. It clings to Christ and can be seen in our good works and life of service to those in our daily vocations of life.

Be faithful. That’s also the church’s charge. Regardless of the challenges, we who make up the church are called to faithfulness. That means the church is a community in motion, not one that is static, but one whose movement is always simultaneously inward to-

ward the Means of Grace (Word and Sacrament) and outward toward people who need this grace.

Culture is likewise never stagnant. It’s always changing, always on the move, and in our society that movement is clearly away from the Gospel. In my last article, I noted how author Mark Sayers said we are in a gray zone — the overlap of time between the ending of an old era and the beginning of a new one. One distinct feature of these times has been expounded on by Aaron Renn in his recent book, which notes that for the first time in the history of our country orthodox Christianity is viewed negatively by secular society (*Life in the Negative World*, 2024).

We certainly see this in our state legislative agendas. Where it used to be welcomed, religion, and especially Christianity, is increasingly seen as a threat to an inclusive society and must not be afforded the religious liberty privileges of the past. We also see it in the general suspicion of Christianity by society.

See **MINISTRY**, Page 8

# INSTALLATIONS



**Rev. Todd Bentz was ordained and installed as pastor of Emanuel Lutheran Church and School, Hamburg, on Feb. 18.** Pictured are, from left, (first row) Rev. Dean Mahlum, Rev. Jorge Gomez, Rev. Dr. Eric Rapp, Rev. Eric Zacharias, Rev. Don Taylor, Rev. Aaron Kuehn; (second row) Rev. Josh Hoffman, Rev. Todd Bentz, Rev. Aaron Beckman, Rev. Greg Snow; (third row) Rev. David Jander, Rev. Jon Niebuhr, Rev. Toby Schmidt, Rev. Dr. Lucas Woodford, Rev. Josh Bernau, Rev. Dr. Brent Parrish; (fourth row) Vicar Joel Symmank, Rev. Jonathan Nack, Rev. Don Andrix, Rev. Mark Shockey and Rev. Jason Neel.



**Rev. James Bender was installed as pastor of Mount Olive Lutheran Church, Anoka, on March 3.** Pictured are, from left, Revs. Vue Lee, Jon Haakana, James Bender, Tom Evans and Bill Pieper.



**Rev. Austin Wellhousen (left) was installed as associate pastor of Hosanna Lutheran Church, Mankato, on Jan. 31.** He is pictured with, from left, Revs. Adam Finney and Mark Biebighauser.



# Blessed by ‘Best Practices’

Best Practices is a crowd-sourced conference rooted in our Lutheran faith, held annually in February in Phoenix. It emphasizes our freedom and creativity in Christ while providing a space of grace and encouragement. We chose to take a team this year to refresh and spark ideas for serving our congregation and community.

A major highlight for our team was the radical hospitality of Christ Church Lutheran, the host church. They went above and beyond to welcome, feed and create space for rest. We plan to initiate more forms of this for our people and visitors to our congregation.

We were also encouraged to build more structure around cultivating the prayer life of our people. The Word of the Lord truly grows, and leaning into Jesus’ invitation to pray was a great reminder. We hope and



pray that all participants are not only benefited, but blessed to be a blessing to our circuits and district.

— *Submitted by Rev. Ryan Alvey*  
Associate Pastor,  
St. Michael’s, Bloomington

Staff members of St. Michael’s, Bloomington, who attended the Best Practices for Ministry Conference, held Feb. 22–24 in Phoenix, were, from left, Rev. Hunde Takele, Michelle Totten, Rev. Pat Simmons, Sue Buening, Rev. Ryan Alvey and Natalie Trzeciak.

## Call Day 2024

This month, students will receive their first pastoral or diaconal ministry placements and second-year students will receive their vicarage or deaconess internship assignments.

**Concordia Seminary, St. Louis**  
**April 23**

**3 p.m.**  
Vicarage and deaconess internship assignments

**7 p.m.**  
Pastoral and diaconal calls

For more information and to watch the livestreams, visit [csl.edu/call-day](https://csl.edu/call-day). The services will also be shown on CSL’s YouTube and Facebook pages.

**Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne**  
**April 23**

**7 p.m.**  
Vicarage and deaconess internship assignments

**April 24**  
**7 p.m.**  
Pastoral and diaconal calls

For more information and to watch the livestreams, visit [ctsfw.edu/callday](https://ctsfw.edu/callday).



LCMS/Erik M. Lunsford

Rev. Daniel Langewisch receives his call during the Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Call Day service in 2023. He is serving as pastor of the Valley Creek campus of Woodbury Lutheran Church, Woodbury.

LWML

## ‘Walk in love’ at convention

By Wendy Sjoblom

VP of Communications,  
LWML Minnesota South District

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. **EPHESIANS 5:1-2**

We welcome you to join us for the LWML 30th Biennial Minnesota South District Convention, to be held June 20-22 under the theme “Walk in Love.” There will be Bible study, mission speakers, a Walking in Prayer event, a basket silent auction to raise money for mites, a Communion worship service, election of new officers, election of new mission grants, purple gift giveaways, singing and fellowship. The convention message is, as we “talk the talk” may we be encouraged to “walk the walk” as God’s beloved children, sharing the love of Christ with others.

The convention will be held at the Mayo Clinic Health System Event Center in Mankato.

As we “Walk in Love” this June, we will collect



Photos: LCMS/Erik M. Lunsford

Among the mission speakers at the LWML district convention in June will be (left) Rev. Vance and Linda Becker, who serve as LCMS missionaries to Kenya; and (below) Gary Thies, director of Mission Central in Mapleton, Iowa.

items for Gifts from the Heart to donate to Orphan Grain Train, a Christian volunteer organization that donates food, clothing and other needed items to those in need in 71 countries. The LWML is collecting new or gently used shoes and socks (sizes child–adult); quilts, blankets and comforters of any size; and cash donations to help pay for shipping. The average shipping cost for a box of donated goods is \$11.

A full shipping container costs \$9,000 to ship overseas.

If you are interested in donating to Orphan Grain Train, you can reach out to your local LWML group or contact Debi Mahoney, our vice-president of Human Resources,



at [vphumancare@mnskwml.org](mailto:vphumancare@mnskwml.org).

If you would like more information about this year’s Gifts from the Heart or the convention, visit [mnskwml.org](http://mnskwml.org) and click the link at the right side of the page. Registration forms can also be found at the website.

We look forward to walking in Christ’s love with you this June!



## TAG grant applications due April 8

**To All Generations** encourages a renewed emphasis in Christian education by making available grants to target new ideas and strategies beyond the scope of regular church/school budgeting. Ministries are able to apply for grants to help fund what they would not be able to fund within their typical budgets.

Specifically, three areas of grant focus were identified:

- **Strengthening** education ministries, including enhancing the quality of Lutheran schools, encouraging opportunities in

parish education, planting new schools and early childhood centers, and supporting educational leadership

- **Developing** unified marketing strategies
- **Increasing** efforts toward parental choice in education

*To All Generations* grant applicants are also encouraged to maximize grant dollars by using collaborative efforts between education ministries.

There is \$40,000 available to be granted! Applications must be received by April 8.



More details and applications can be found at [mnsdistrict.org/tag-grants](http://mnsdistrict.org/tag-grants).



**YOUR DISTRICT MISSION GIFTS AT WORK**

# Gospel hope in South St. Paul

The Wakota Ridge Campus of Woodbury Lutheran Church is the product of a merger between Concordia Lutheran Church, South St. Paul, and Woodbury Lutheran Church. Concordia had suffered from an aging and declining membership resulting in fewer resources and less energy to do the work to keep the church going. But the desire of the congregation was to find a way that the Gospel would still be taught and lived on the corner of Fifth Avenue and Douglas Street in South St. Paul. In the fall of 2020 our two churches met and began exploring the possibility of a merger.

The merger officially took place in June 2021 with the closing of Concordia and the relaunch of the Wakota Ridge Campus. A group of members from Woodbury's other two campuses joined the remaining Concordia members and a new church family was formed out of two. What could have been a difficult time became a wonderful blessing as new friendships were made and a sense of purpose and mission emerged.

We have a team focused on several areas of community service: Kaposia Education Center, an elementary school two blocks from our campus; Neighbors Inc. food, clothing and social service agency; and our local neighborhood and the city of South St. Paul. We have a team at Kaposia school each Friday, in partnership with Every Meal (an organization that works on alleviating child hunger), delivering weekend meal bags for students who suffer from food insecurity to take home. We assist with other school events and activities as well. In the nearly three years of our campus, we've developed a wonderful relationship with the school administration and staff.

A couple of young men who walk from what they call their "sober house" started worshiping with us. They're in



recovery and decided to go to church even though it wasn't a big part of their upbringing. What they found was a congregation that embraced them just as they were, who invited them to participate and serve, and to call Wakota Ridge home. Over and over again we hear from guests who worship with us what a friendly, welcoming place Wakota Ridge is. And over and over again we've been able to hear stories of the Holy Spirit's work in people who bring brokenness and hurt with them and find grace and hope in the Gospel preached and taught, but also lived out.

Almost three years into the merger, Wakota Ridge is vibrant and thriving. We're continuing to look for and find ways to serve our neighborhood and we're celebrating the work God is doing in and through those who worship with us. God is good and we're grateful to be on mission with Him.

— **Submitted by Vicar Joel Symmank**  
Woodbury Lutheran Church,  
Wakota Ridge Campus

# LEARN ABOUT governance structure change proposals



Over the past year and a half, the Minnesota South District Board of Directors have been learning about the advantages of a hybrid policy governance structure. This is the model and structure the LCMS Board of Directors uses to conduct its work.

Making a change to this governance model clarifies the fiduciary responsibility of the Board and the ecclesiastical supervision of the district president and aligns it with the Synod's governance practices. A change would primarily impact how the Board goes about its fiduciary business, however doing so would require changes in the Minnesota South District's Bylaws.

Those interested have multiple opportunities to learn about these proposed changes in advance of the June 2025 convention and the impact these changes will have on how we work together. They are as follows.

1. There will be break-out sessions on both days at the *Go First!* Ministry Conference, to be held April 19-20 at Concordia Academy in Roseville (see next page).
2. Open forums will be held for anyone interested at the district Board of Directors meetings on May 7 and Sept. 16. The locations are to be determined.
3. District pastors will have an opportunity to learn about the changes during the district business meeting at the Pastors Conference at Maddens on May 14.

# Go First! Ministry Conference

April 19-20 • Concordia Academy, Roseville

It's almost here!

Disciples from congregations across our Minnesota South District will converge on the campus of Concordia Academy in Roseville (2400 Dale St.) April 19-20 for the first **Go First! Ministry Conference**. Why? Good question!

Some are seeking encouragement as they serve others in the name of Jesus. Some may seek good ideas from some of the more than 50 presenters that will guide them to better engage with people and build relationships demonstrating the love of Jesus Christ. Some are looking for new partnerships with other disciples and organizations that share their desire to love and serve others.

Some are coming for the fun of getting together and the opportunity on Friday evening to celebrate the One



who died to make us new creations with word and song! Some discovered they could attend without any registration or meal costs — hey, its free food! Whatever the reasons, we are anticipating a really

great time and a great crowd. If you would like to experience this gathering, register today before we run out of space!

More information can be found at [mnsdistrict.org](http://mnsdistrict.org). Click the “Go First!” link at the top of the page and find the conference link. Or scan the QR code. Or call the district office at 763-233-2162.



Let's *Go First!* — together!

— **Submitted by Dr. Phil Johnson**  
District Assistant to the President,  
Mission Formation

## Congregation mission receipts

### For the period ending Feb. 29, 2024

Actual receipts.....	\$225,053
Budget receipts .....	\$170,831
Over (under) amount .....	\$54,222

#### Year-to-date receipts

Actual receipts.....	\$355,305
Budget receipts .....	\$341,664
Over (under) anticipated amount.....	\$13,641

#### Use of mission receipts (year to date)

50% designated to district and Synod.....	\$279,692
100% designated to district.....	\$63,878
100% designated to Synod operations.....	\$11,735
Total receipts .....	\$355,305

#### Mission receipts—2024 vs. 2023

Mission receipts — YTD 2024 .....	\$355,305
Mission receipts — YTD 2023 .....	\$287,688
Over (under) last year .....	\$67,617

2024 congregational receipts budgeted —  
\$2,050,000 (does not include designated to Synod)

## MINNESOTA SOUTH DISTRICT LCEF

#### January 2024

New investments .....	\$4,875,652
Withdrawals.....	\$3,833,210
Net increase (decrease).....	\$1,042,442

#### Year-to-date July 1, 2023–Jan. 31, 2024

New investments .....	\$18,045,567
Withdrawals.....	\$17,287,231
Net increase (decrease).....	\$758,336



## Go First! Ministry Conference

# Our Event App is LIVE

Download the *Whova* app to get the most out of the event.

- ➔ Personalize your agenda
- ➔ Browse sessions & info
- ➔ Get event updates and notifications
- ➔ Connect with other attendees






## DISTRICT OFFICE

- ▶ 14301 Grand Ave. S.  
Burnsville, MN 55306
- ▶ 952-435-2550
- ▶ [mnsdistrict.org](http://mnsdistrict.org)





## Educating our early educators

About 270 educators converged on Concordia University, St. Paul March 1-2 for the Minnesota Early Childhood Educators' Conference, which provided 36 sessions on a variety of topics.

Two keynote speakers gave meaningful presentations. Becky Danielson provided training on building a firm foundation for effective parent-teacher relationships. Megan Miessler talked about brain development and ways to

interact with students and families in the classroom to help impact the social and emotional development of the brain in a positive way.

Early childhood (infants, toddlers, preschool) educators and directors are required to earn 24 hours of training annually. This conference helps our educators receive the required training in a variety of areas.

The work our early childhood educators do each day with the children is so very important and a blessing to the families who attend our centers and programs. The conference goal is to not only help our teachers grow in knowledge, but that their hearts may also be filled and refreshed to continue God's calling to teach these "little lambs."

— Submitted by Jan Stockman



2024

# THEOLOGICAL CONVOCATIONS



In 2024 the Minnesota South District will sponsor

## THEOLOGICAL CONVOCATIONS

Hosted by a local congregation in each region across the district

**9:00 AM - 12:00 PM**

Lunch to follow



Pastors, lay people, and the general public are cordially invited to attend all convocations in all regions. There is no charge, but we kindly ask you to register to have a count for materials and lunch preparation. Use the QR code to register.

- DATES, TOPICS, AND REGIONS**
- FRIDAY, MAY 31**  
*Ecclesiology and the Future of the LCMS*  
(Hosted in Region 1)
  - FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 20**  
*Worship Theology and Practice*  
(Hosted at Glory of Christ, Plymouth)
  - FRIDAY, OCTOBER 18**  
*Office of the Ministry & Routes to Ordination*  
(Hosted at Trinity, Rochester)
  - FRIDAY, OCTOBER 25**  
*Theology of the Practice of the Lord's Supper*  
(Hosted at St. Paul's, Fulda)

## Pastors to meet

Pastors from the entire state will join together May 13-15 for the annual Minnesota State Pastors Conference at Maddens on Gull Lake in Brainerd. The conference combines worship, Bible study, education and fellowship to rejuvenate and encourage pastors in their ministries.

The theme is relevant to current uses of technology: "Exploring AI." The keynote speakers will present to these advancements.

For registration and lodging information, please visit [mnsdistrict.org/mns-pc-2024](https://mnsdistrict.org/mns-pc-2024)

**Let's also remember the ladies!** The pastors' wives have the opportunity to attend a tea and Bible study, both led by Dr. Stacy Lung, Lutheran Island Camp executive director. Along with casual gathering times, there will also be a scheduled fellowship time at the resort.

The conference at Maddens is always a highlight event. Please support and encourage your pastor as he attends this time of inspiration, collaboration, relaxation and learning.

## MINISTRY

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1)

For example, in 1952 President Dwight Eisenhower famously said, “Our form of government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply religious faith, and I don’t care what it is.” But now, as Renn details, Christian morality is expressly repudiated and seen as a threat to the public good and public moral order (p.7).

Even so, the Lord calls us to be faithful, to trust in His promises. As we do, we rest assured the gates of hell will not prevail against His church. This confidence allows us to maintain a non-anxious presence as we navigate and lead through the challenges of our culture.

In fact, sometimes faith requires we act with urgency and decisiveness, even in the face of adversity. Faith is busy after all. It’s always in motion, clinging to Christ and loving our neighbor. The adversity of a gray zone negative world has certainly depleted North American Christianity, even amid a multiethnic and growing national population. Likewise with the LCMS. In 2000 the Synod reported our membership was at 2.55 million members. As of 2022, Synod reports we were at 1.7 million members. We had 6,143 congregations in 2000 and 5,888 congregations in 2022. Additionally, we are now beginning to experience the long predicted pastoral shortage. Our February Council of Presidents meeting reported we have nearly 11% of our congregations vacant, with another 10% served only part-time. Likewise, our Lutheran schools are experiencing a massive shortage of trained Lutheran school teachers, but this as enrollments are swelling.

All together this creates a lot of hand wringing. I do not care for hand wringing. It often brings two types of reactions: increased anxiety and panic or immobilization and inaction. Part of being faithful includes using wisdom to act strategically and urgently given the facts, while avoiding unnecessary anxiety and panic that leads to bad decisions. Like riding a horse, we must be active in keeping our balance lest we fall off either side into panic or inaction. Such behaviors war against faithfulness.

But that’s why I give thanks for the pastors and church leaders who bring thoughtful



Walking together as the church, we need to collaborate on how to address the challenges of our times for the good of God’s people and the growth of Christ’s kingdom. In other words, consider how we might **Go First.**”



options and actions to our gray zone and negative world challenges, even as they remain stalwartly faithful. I invite you to add your voice to the mix. Walking together as the church, we need to collaborate on how to address the challenges of our times for the good of God’s people and the growth of Christ’s kingdom. In other words, consider how we might *Go First*.

Current examples of action are seen in our Synod’s *Set Apart to Serve* emphasis that’s making an intentional concerted effort to raise up future church workers and pastors. So join us in encouraging our youth to consider church work! Likewise, my own alma mater, Concordia University, St. Paul has guaranteed that any aspiring church worker will not pay more than \$6,000 in annual tuition, and further, that any pre-seminary/pre-deaconess student will pay no tuition at all.

Yet we still have immediate needs and challenges to consider, intentionally, strategically and faithfully. We must consider options to address the present pastoral shortage, as well as the effects of the negative world upon the organizational structure and active ministry of the local congregation.

- ▶ How do we serve those who long for the Means of Grace but have no pastor?
- ▶ How do we remain faithful yet also take salutary risks that adapt to the challenge of our times?
- ▶ How might district and Synod practices be more adaptive or creative to address the contracting (shrinking) church environment?
- ▶ How can congregations collaborate with other congregations and/or adjust their polity to adapt to shrinking conditions?
- ▶ How might congregations build bridges and interact with a broader community (and government) that does not inherently welcome their presence while remaining faithful?
- ▶ How can church workers and pastors support one another and collaborate on how to offer a faithful non-anxious presence in a gray zone negative world?

There is much for us to consider and put into action. Yet like he did for the congregation at Smyrna, the Lord promises He will be with us during the tribulation we encounter, come what may, even as we await the crown of life He won for us through His shed blood on the cross.