



Good News-Letter

St. Michael's Ev. Lutheran Church

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A Member of the WELS

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go to a place that he was going to receive as an inheritance, and he left without knowing where he was going (Hebrews 11:8)

The book of Hebrews shows us that faith made all the difference in the life of a man of faith named Abraham. What made the difference when he was waiting for God to keep his promises? It was faith. Faith made all the difference when Abraham considered where his home was. What a difference faith made in Abraham's life. What a difference faith makes in our life as well.

Faith made all the difference when Abraham was waiting for God to keep his promises. Abraham was living safe and sound in his homeland of Haran. That's when the Lord told him, *"Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you"* (Genesis 12:1-3).

Abraham did not leave his homeland because he was in trouble. It wasn't that he was living in a bad neighborhood either. It's just that his Lord decided it was time for him to move. And Abraham didn't question the Lord. He simply packed up and moved. It meant taking his wife and workers far from family and friends. They'd soon be living on foreign soil. Why would Abraham make such a move? The writer to the Hebrews tells us that faith made all the difference to Abraham. He had no idea what was waiting for him in that new land. He simply believed God and went.

Faith made all the difference when it came to leaving his homeland. Faith made all the difference when God made promises concerning Abraham's future. God had promised Abraham an incredible number of offspring. Abraham needed faith because he and his wife were childless. They remained childless until they were too old to have children. Age didn't make a difference to Abraham. Faith did. Faith made all the difference because of the One who made the promises. God had promised Abraham new land and numerous offspring. Since God made the promises, to Abraham, a man of

faith, it was as good as done. Abraham was sure of what he hoped for. He was certain of what he could not see.

And the best thing for which Abraham was certain was that one of his offspring would rescue him and the world from sin. Faith led Abraham to see clearly that this Savior was God's own Son who would take on human flesh. Even though it would take another 2,000 years before the Savior would finally arrive, Abraham still got credit for his Savior's work. When God shared his promise with Abraham, Scripture tells us, *"Abraham believed in the LORD, and the LORD credited it to him as righteousness."* (Genesis 15:6). When God promised Abraham a Savior, faith made all the difference. By faith Abraham stood righteous before God. That's the difference that faith makes.

Is there really any advantage living 2,000 years after Christ? We do get to see how God fulfilled his promises. When the time was just right, God sent his Son into our world as a descendant of Abraham. Our Savior was able to do something that neither Abraham nor any other descendant could do. He met every righteous requirement of God's holy law. He took our place and endured God's punishment for every one of our sins. This payment cost him his life. But then he came back to life. Now a world of sinners can stand righteous before God. We get to see Jesus fulfill the promises God first made to Abraham. So it doesn't really matter if you live before Christ or after him.

Faith makes all the difference when you're waiting for God to keep his promises. God has made some promises that still apply to our future. They include his continual presence and our eternal home. We need those promises because we don't know what lies ahead. Serious setbacks are out there. They may involve our health or the health of a loved one. They may affect our relationship with someone very close. It may result in serious loss. It may be financial. It may ruin our good name. How can we possibly handle it? How can we be sure that God will be right there no matter what? Will he really work everything out for our good? Will we stand up under adversity or fall flat on your backs? With faith in your heart, you can face any setback. You'll stand firm holding tight to God's promises.

Two district presidents elected at district conventions

During this summer's district conventions, two districts elected new presidents. The Pacific Northwest District elected Rev. Daniel Lange, and the Arizona-California District elected Rev. Joel Heckendorf. They will replace the outgoing presidents: Rev. John Steinbrenner from the Pacific Northwest District, who accepted a call to serve as pastor at Martin Luther, Oshkosh, Wis., and Rev. Jon Buchholz, who chose not to stand for reelection in the Arizona-California District.

Rev. Daniel Lange currently serves as pastor at Light of Life, Covington, Wash. Lange was born in Arkansas where his father, Rev. Douglas Lange, was assigned to plant a mission church.

During his childhood summers, Lange, with his family, had the opportunity to stay at a family property near Eagle River, Wis. "This place holds a special place in my heart," says Lange. "It was here that I received most of my ministry encouragement from my grandfather, Robert Otterstatter. It was at his side, fixing a broken pipe or shingling a cabin roof, where he spent hours talking to me about 'the good Lord.'"

Lange met his wife, Sara, at Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn. "I didn't know at the time how tremendously the Lord would bless me through Sara," remarks Lange. "For all the sermons I've given, my wife has given more. Her text is 'Love your husband!' and her sermons are preached through her daily actions in our house, at our church, and everywhere in our life together." The Langes have been blessed with three children—Madelyn (14), Olivia (12), and Zachary (9).

As he begins his new role, Lange is grateful for the support and advice he has received from the outgoing district president. "John Steinbrenner continues to teach me many lessons," says Lange. "In all things, he has placed the kingdom first."

He continues, "I look forward to visiting our churches and schools. I'm eager to witness how Jesus is blessing them, to pray with them, and to serve them in any manner possible."

Rev. Joel Heckendorf currently serves as pastor at Light of the Valleys, Reno, Nev. As a Wisconsin native who grew up on a dairy farm in Jackson, Heckendorf remarks, "When I took the call to start a mission in Reno, it was the first time I lived outside of Wisconsin and it was the first time I was part of a congregation with less than one thousand members. Being in a mission has helped me gain a whole new perspective on ministry."

Heckendorf has gathered insights from various people and congregations throughout his life. First, he learned from his parents, who were both involved in their home congregation. But it wasn't until his senior year in high school that he considered becoming a pastor. "The summer before my senior year, I'd spend a few mornings a week lifting weights and playing basketball with a seminarian from my congregation," explains Heckendorf. "As he let 17-year-old me hang around his seminary buddies, I started to consider pastoral ministry because of their peer influence."

Now as he considers his new role as district president, Heckendorf can see how the Lord has prepared him for this path. For example, while serving as pastor at Immanuel, Greenville, Wis., Heckendorf served on the praesidium of the Northern Wisconsin District and learned a great deal from its president, Rev. Joel Zank. Additionally, Heckendorf explains, "Being on Synodical Council the past few years, I admired the laymen and administrators of our synod. Also, serving as Multi-Language Productions' administrative chairman has broadened my experience to consider many cultures and to work alongside many gifted people." He also notes how God prepared him through his wife, Mary. "Whether it's watching her use her gifts or receiving her support, I thank God for providing the perfect complement."

Heckendorf says he is grateful for all the prayers and words of encouragement through the years. "The number of people who have said they'd love to be my 'Aaron'—to help hold me up—is amazing," he says. "No matter what challenges we experience in our personal or professional lives, we can rejoice in the Lord, knowing that he is our Savior."

Learn more about the role of district presidents in WELS President Rev. Mark Schroeder's column in this month's *Forward in Christ*.

The impact of fellowship

As a new mission start, you ought to be focused on outreach, right? Yes, but there's more to it than that.

In our first few years as a mission, we focused heavily on outreach. We held kids' events, we organized other events, we piggy-backed off of community events, we canvassed, and I went to just about every community networking event that I could find. And this was good. It was extremely beneficial because we met a lot of people and had opportunities to invite someone to come hear the gospel and even opportunities to share the gospel then and there.

Before I write the rest of this, I want to say that we will continue to keep doing this outreach. It is important.

But, outreach is not the only thing that a mission church should be paying attention too and, as we would come to find out, our in-reach directly impacted our outreach.

Between 2020-2022, Sure Foundation grew relatively fast. Adding roughly 50 people within those years that came from a variety of backgrounds. Some of these additions were WELS transfers (people moving to South Dakota from other places of the country); some of these additions were adult confirmands; and a few of these additions were new births.

This was an amazing blessing and exciting times, especially for a new church. However, there was a struggle that came along with this growth. The core group of people that started this church, that had gotten to know each other really well, didn't have the same sort of friendships with this mass of new people that had come into the church. What were we to do?

Well, we continued to do outreach, but we started to make a focused effort on in-reach. Lots of fellowship opportunities were offered – many, many potlucks. New members were slowly integrated into volunteering efforts. And do you know what happened? Relationships began to form. People knew each other's names. They had shared experiences and familiarity with each other. The overall vibe (to use young person's slang) of the congregation improved and prospects/visitors could feel this.

Here's an example. . . Bob and Virginia started visiting worship sometime in the spring of 2023. Later that Fall, they took our Faith Builders Class and became members. At one point I asked them, what was it about Sure Foundation that they valued? They responded quickly saying two things: 1) they know that what they are receiving on Sundays is the Word of God and they didn't have to doubt that, and 2) they felt like they were welcomed into a family, that people of this church genuinely enjoyed being together.

That warms a pastor's heart, but it's one thing to say that, it's another thing altogether to mean it. Bob and Virginia meant it. They invited their family to come too. They loved their church and they couldn't imagine not inviting their loved ones to come and hear the Word of God and experience the fellowship of a body of believers. Their invite led to two teenagers being baptized and two adults being confirmed. Praise be to God!

Their story has taught me something and that is that outreach is important, friendship evangelism is crucial, and also, that the love expressed in fellowship within a congregation has a bigger impact than you may ever realize.

Written by Rev. Craig Wilke, home missionary at Sure Foundation Lutheran Church in Brandon, S.D.

Flyover country

When I was assigned to serve in South Dakota back in 2007, the first images that floated through my mind as I sat in the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary gymnasium were from the TV series *Little House on the Prairie*. Cue the theme song and little Laura Ingalls running through the grasses. That's where I was about to go . . . somewhere in South Dakota. People came up to me afterward and said, "Oh, you are going to love it there!" Little did they know how much their words were fighting with the stereotype in my head. But, I do love it here! I love serving God's people here, raising my family here, and reaching the lost here. I love seeing the people he continues to send here from all over the country.

I am blessed to serve on the Dakota-Montana District Mission Board, and when I travel for meetings and visits, I can't help but stare out the window during take off and landing and think of my old silly stereotype.

Many people consider this district flyover country. How much mission work is there really to do in Montana and the Dakotas? There are rural areas that are losing population. But I have only seen the population of towns and cities grow in my 17 years here, and I don't see any end to the mission work that needs to be done. What seems like rural America is growing. Families are moving here from all over the country looking for something better. Praise God that he would include the gospel among those better things to be found! Praise God that he would not just fly over "flyover" country, but use his people here to know the names of those living and moving here. There is just as much sin-brokenness and need for the gospel here as anywhere else. People moving here are coming along with the same hurts and burdens that weighed heavily on their hearts while living on either coast. If they were worth reaching there, they are most certainly worth reaching here.

Maybe the biggest difference is that you can see more of the sky while talking with someone about the God who created it for them. You can feel more grass under your feet when you talk with someone about the one who took on human flesh and felt the grass under his feet as he made his way to the cross for them. And you probably hear more wind while the Holy Spirit creates and strengthens faith through the same means of grace that are needed everywhere.

Who knows, maybe you and your family might even consider moving to Montana or the Dakotas to reach these people, too.

