



Good News-Letter

St. Michael's Ev. Lutheran Church

December 2025

A Member of the WELS

This saying is trustworthy and worthy of full acceptance: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners," of whom I am the worst. (1 Timothy 1:15)

This is the first of five "trustworthy" sayings in the pastoral epistles of 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus. Paul describes this trustworthy statement as being worthy of full acceptance. This trustworthy statement is not like the myths and genealogies that Paul had been warning Timothy against in the opening chapter of this first epistle.

"Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" is a simple statement that in one brief sentence that combines the incarnation of the Son of God and the purpose of his incarnation. We get to celebrate his incarnation this month when he entered our world as the Babe of Bethlehem. The reason he entered our world was to save sinners like us.

This was the only way God could do it. None of us can meet God halfway. God demands perfection. None of us comes close. Each and every day we fail at meeting his perfect standard. We may obey the laws of the land so we never end up in jail. But how well have we kept God's law? Even if we've never laid a hand on our neighbor, we've harbored hateful thoughts. We may never sleep with a neighbor's spouse, but we still entertain lustful desires in our heart. We have not robbed a bank, but what about our greed & discontent?

It's interesting what Paul admits about himself in this trustworthy statement. He claims to be the worst of sinners. We certainly know his past. Before he was a follower of Christ, he made it his life's ambition to persecute Christians. We're introduced to him at the stoning death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Paul, then known as Saul, was guarding the coats of his assassins, and giving approval to this murderous act. Even as he was seeking to destroy Christianity, on the road to Damascus the Lord Jesus appeared to him. It wasn't to destroy him. Instead, he converted him to follow Christ and even proclaim his saving gospel.

Paul calls himself the worst of sinners. He wasn't the only one in that category. Sin persists in our lives. We shouldn't despair when we struggle with temptation. We shouldn't be surprised if our firm resolve to break

some bad habit we're battling doesn't immediately bring that habit to an end. The devil doesn't fall over and play dead that easily.

What can we expect? That God won't give up on us. "*Chief of sinners though I be, Jesus shed his blood for me*" (CW 385). Christ's blood cleanses me from all sin. Little by little, through the power of the gospel, God will beat the devil down. More and more fully he will conform us to the image of his Son. Don't call it quits. God is faithful. His word does work.

And his word works in bringing us peace. It's a heavenly peace that we all need in this sin-darkened world. We're not going to find it at work, or at play. Sin has tainted both. It's not going to be found in our communities or our government at any level. Sin's effects can be found there too. It can only be found where God's word does its best work. It's found in God's church, the body of believers, where Christ Jesus rules every heart.

What a blessing as we gather for additional services this month to celebrate our Savior's birth. What joy fills our hearts as we listen to our children share that wonderful news in song and recitation. We never tire of hearing that to us a child is born, to us a son is given. Imagine the heavenly honor that a few angels received when God commanded them to take that good news to shepherds outside Bethlehem. When the angels were finished, the shepherds got busy. They searched for the child that fulfilled God's promise. Then they shared the news with strangers in town for the census.

It's good news that we get to hear again and share with the people in our lives. For believers who hear the message, it will fortify their faith in Christ and keep them looking ahead to glory. For the first timers who get to hear the real reason for the season, they'll experience joy like never before. They'll understand what true giving is having received God's greatest gift themselves. They'll see the lights we display on our houses can only mean that Christ is the light of the world. And the green trees that we set up in our living rooms can only mean that eternal life has come in the person of Jesus Christ. Keep celebrating God's greatest gift to all. Come, let us adore him. He is Christ the Lord.

WELS Synodical Council meets

The Synodical Council met Nov. 7–8 for its fall meeting at the Center for Mission and Ministry, Waukesha, Wis. The Synodical Council (SC) is the group of lay leaders and called workers that oversees the synod's operations, planning, and budget.

The following issues were addressed at this meeting:

- Mr. Kyle Egan, WELS' chief financial officer, reported that synod finances remain healthy, with higher-than-expected Congregation Mission Offerings and gifts from individuals this year and lower expenses than forecasted. All areas of ministry reported increased levels in their special funds. The annual audit has been completed with all entities receiving an unmodified opinion—the best that can be given.
- The “Christ through us” long-range strategic plan is beginning to be implemented by all areas of ministry.
- A task force on ministry recruitment is continuing its work. 3 new ministry recruitment counselors have been called and are working to define the duties and scope of the program.
- Planning for building projects at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis., (classrooms, offices, library remodeling, and a gathering center) and Luther Preparatory School, Watertown, Wis., (music classrooms and auditorium) is proceeding.
- The SC approved calling two new missionaries to begin work in Senegal, Africa; a church planting coordinator in Latin America; coordinators for women's ministry in Europe and Africa; and a professor at Asia Lutheran Seminary. These positions do not require additional synod operating support, since the funds are available from World Missions special funds. The SC also approved additional staffing in WELS Communications to allow the team to better leverage existing and emerging digital communication tools to reach a new generation while also maintaining valued communication tools upon which older members rely.
- Synod subsidiaries (WELS Investment Funds, WELS Foundation, WELS Church Extension Fund, and Northwestern Publishing House) all reported strong financial results.
- WELS has received more than \$4 million in gifts toward the 100 Missions in 10 Years initiative. With the seven recently approved new missions starts, we are slightly shy of the goal of 30 in the first three years of the effort.
- The SC discussed issues relating to WELS VEBA health insurance, the synod pension, and the synod's compensation guidelines.

This was the first meeting of two new SC members who were elected at the 2025 synod convention: Rev. Bart Brauer (pastor at-large) and Rev. Jon Bauer (pastor at-large). Newly called administrator of the Board for Ministerial Education, Rev. Charlie Vannieuwenhoven, will join the SC after the first of the year.

The next meeting of the Synodical Council will take place in April 2026.

“Is it really worth it, Pastor?”

I had met Jay earlier that year in the fall when he came to a Bible study on the University of Wisconsin–Whitewater campus. He was a charismatic, funny, frustratingly intelligent young man with many questions. Hard questions. Questions that took time, energy, nuance, and well . . . time. Jay was a Christian sponge, soaking up every drop of truth he could. He hadn't grown up Christian. His parents were immigrants from India and practiced a nominal, cultural Hinduism. In God's Word, he found answers to the biggest questions of life—answers that were not to be found in the worldview of his upbringing.

These answers, however, came with a cost. According to Jay, Baptism was off the table—his family would view this as an unforgivable betrayal of their culture and possibly disown him. Even without being baptized, consistent contact with God's Word confronted Jay with a sobering truth: Jesus will not share worship with another. Jay knew he could no longer worship with his parents, brother, and grandfather. Even going through the motions would be dishonest. So he didn't. This caused a rift between him and his family, including his grandfather, a man whom Jay deeply loved and respected.

A few months into the school year, Jay stayed after Bible study to ask questions like normal, but this question was different. This question wasn't about the difference between Catholic and Lutheran concepts of salvation or the Bible's teaching on the purpose of secular government. With enough theological training, these questions can be answered well. This question, however, was far more difficult: “Is it really worth it, Pastor?”

How ironic that Jay's most devastating question was the only one that could be answered with a single word. “Yes.” After some shared tears, a woefully ineloquent stammering from me, and an embrace between brothers, Jay walked back to his dorm that night. And he came back. He learned over time that he was not alone in his pain. Many Christians before him had met searing rejection and opposition of their closest loved ones for the sake of Christ. During months of meetings, questions, and searching, the Holy Spirit was

enlightening him. Jay was baptized into the great family of believers.

His story isn't over. Not by a long shot! He admits he has much to learn and much to unlearn. He continues to pay the price of discipleship. He continues to grow in the Word and often brings his friends along for the ride. He is a Christian: chosen and destined for glory. On the Last Day he will have many painful sacrifices to lay at Jesus' feet. In that final, precious moment, when the Lord proclaims, "Well done," Jay will rediscover what he's known all along.

He really is worth it.

Written by Samuel Schulz, pastor at St. John's Lutheran Church in Whitewater, Wis.

Ministry recruitment counselors ready to serve

On Oct. 20, Mrs. Mary Heckendorf, Mr. Samuel McKenna, and Rev. Mark Schroeder were installed as ministry recruitment counselors during chapel at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis.

The ministry recruitment counselors will work alongside pastors, teachers, staff ministers, parents, and lay leaders to help them actively recognize gifts in others, share information about ministerial education, and keep gospel ministry top of mind for WELS youth. This initiative aligns with the "Calling" priority of the long-range strategic plan, which focuses on producing more workers for a growing harvest.

Each ministry recruitment counselor has a unique background that will help shape his or her efforts. Heckendorf has served as both a WELS and public school teacher. McKenna is retired from the military and was a recruiter for the Marines and the National Guard. Schroeder most recently served as pastor at Peace, Gilbert, Ariz., and has also taught at Michigan Lutheran Seminary, Saginaw, Mich., and Luther Preparatory School, Watertown, Wis.

Their efforts are critical as WELS faces declining birth rates. "2024 was the fifth year in a row that we have more deaths than births in our synod," notes McKenna. "So it's important that we find different places and new ways to encourage people to be called workers—pastors, teachers, staff ministers, & missionaries." Hear more from the counselors about the importance of these positions.

Charlie Vannieuwenhoven, who will begin serving as administrator of WELS Board for Ministerial Education in January, will help guide the efforts of the ministry recruitment counselors.

"Working to increase our recruitment efforts will be an immediate focus," says Vannieuwenhoven. "The ministry recruitment counselors will play a big role in these efforts. Working with them to help understand their role and see how they can best go about their work will be one of my first priorities."

From gratitude to generosity

As Thanksgiving approaches, Joel and Denise Luehmann are reflecting on the many blessings God has given their family. "We are so thankful for our faith, family, church, & the opportunities God has provided," Denise shared. "We want to give back in gratitude—to honor God with the gifts he has entrusted to us."

Now in a new stage of life with their children grown, they wanted to give in a way that is both intentional and impactful. They found a donor-advised fund (DAF) to be the ideal tool. It allows them to "bunch" donations and provide consistent gifts to the ministries they support—a feature they value because it helps ministries better plan for the gifts they receive each year. "Denise and I have also used the DAF for appreciated assets due to the tax and administrative advantages," Joel added. They appreciated how a WELS Christian giving counselor helped clarify the details and guide them through the process. Working with their giving counselor and WELS Foundation, which manages DAFs and other planned gifts, the Luehmanns found the process straightforward and rewarding. "The WELS Foundation staff was warm and helpful and made it easy to get started," Joel said. "They explained the options, answered our questions, and helped us implement a giving plan that fit perfectly with our goals."

The Luehmanns also appreciate that their DAF is invested through WELS Investment Funds, which has generated strong returns. "It's an underappreciated program," Joel shared. "Professional management, very low fees, and the ability to pool investments with others—it actually generates better returns than we could on our own. The Lord increases the returns, which gives us even more to give—and more joy in giving." Through their DAF, Joel and Denise support their home congregation—St. Paul's in North Mankato, Minn.—as well as their area Lutheran high school, ELS ministries, and several WELS-affiliated ministries.

This Thanksgiving, you too can turn gratitude into lasting impact. To explore these opportunities—or to learn how to establish or donor-advised fund for a ministry close to your heart—contact your local WELS Christian giving counselor at wels.net/giving-counselors or call **800-827-5482**.

The above items recently appeared on our synod's webpage: www.wels.net.

What's going on at St. Michael's

- Our Outreach Committee is handing out Christian invitations to area residents. Interested in helping? Join us at church on Dec. 6, 13, 20, 1pm. Also take home an invite on the small table across from mailboxes to share with the unchurched in your life.
- The Peter Plan continues at St. Michael's in a prayerful effort to bring back inactive members. Volunteers are still needed for contacting them. Keep circling your name as you attend worship so we can have an accurate record to help us reach members in need of encouragement—"Let us not neglect meeting together, as some have the habit of doing. Rather, let us encourage each other, and all the more as you see the Day approaching." (He 10:25)
- We welcome to our family of believers by baptism Lincoln Michael Engstrand, son of Ronald Jr. & Laura Engstrand, in a private ceremony on Nov. 15.
- Pastor Westenberg continues serving the vacancy at Christ, Cochrane. A gathering of St. Michael's & Christ's Church Councils met on Sun. Nov. 16 to discuss joint ministry. Nothing was decided except to keep meeting.
- Pastor Westenberg has returned the call to serve three congregations near Rhinelander, WI. Please send them in your prayers that the Lord will lead a faithful pastor to serve them soon.

Calendar Highlights

- Elder/Peter Plan mtg., Wed. Dec. 3, 5pm
- 19-min. Bible study, Wed. Dec. 3 & 17, 6:30pm
- Decorating Church, Sat. Dec. 6, 4pm
- Christmas Eve practices, Saturdays at 8:30am (at St. Michaels 11/29 & 12/13; at Christ 12/6 & 12/20)
- Brass practices, Dec. 6 & 13, 10:30am; Dec. 19, 7pm
- Hand out Christmas invites, Sat. Dec. 6, 13, 20, 1pm
- Ladies Aid Christmas @ Christ, Wed. Dec. 10, 12pm
- Outreach Committee mtg., Mon., Dec. 15, 5:30pm
- Church Council mtg., Mon., Dec. 15, 7pm
- Bible study at The Landing, Fri. Dec. 19, 8am
- Children's Christmas/Cochrane: Sun. Dec. 21, 11am
- Brass Concert, Sun., Dec. 21, 3pm
- Christmas Eve Service: Wed., Dec. 24, 6pm
- Christmas Day Service, Thu., Dec. 25, 9:30am
- New Year's Eve Service/Cochrane, Dec. 31, 6:30pm

Your Council Members

Jonathan Mayer	President/Education
Ryan Ligman	Secretary
Mark Horstman	Outreach

Jim Baures
Jess Veraguth
Mike Baures

Treasurer/Stewardship
Properties
Financial Secretary/Elders

Those Who Help

Ushers for December

Mark Horstman	Jim Wick
Mike Baures	Asher Duerr
Paul Isakson	Dennis Wolfe
Allen Glodowski	

Altar Guild for December

Jean Burmeister	Yvonne Tamke
Marie Grossell	Cally Ligman

Money Counters for December

Roger Bechly	Kevin Buswell
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Ushers for January

Jonathan Mayer	Richard Putz
Ryan Ligman	Merlyn Klebig
Stanley Steward	Greg Parnow
John Schlesselman	

Altar Guild for January

Denise Bechly	Kay Doebeert
Angie Anderson	Wanda Putz

Money Counters for January

Elroy Conradt	Mike Baures
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REFORMATION/GERMANY TOUR. You are invited to join a 12-day (April 20-May 1, 2026) tour of Germany emphasizing sites of the Reformation. Places like Wittenberg, Worms, Wartburg, Eisleben, Erfurt are included. Non-religious sites include Berlin, Mainz, Rothenburg, Rhine River cruise etc.. There is an optional 3-day extension to Munich, Oberammergau, Neuschwanstein Castle etc. The tour will be hosted by retired pastor Eugene Kock who has been to Germany many times. For more info.: pastorkock@yahoo.com.

Upcoming Concerts at Luther

On Sun., Dec. 7 Coulee Chorale will present their 2025 Christmas Concert at 2pm. On Sun., Dec. 14 the bands and choirs of Luther High School will present their Christmas Concert, "This Child Shall Be Our Peace," at 2pm.

Save the date!



The next WELS National Conference on Lutheran Leadership will be held January 19-21, 2026.