



South Wisconsin District Convention

District President's Report to the delegates
 Concordia University, Wisconsin
 June 7, 2009

Part 1. Introduction

In four days it will be a full three years since first elected to serve as the president of the South Wisconsin District of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. It was June 11, 2006. In the days leading up to the convention I came to better understand the struggles of Moses at the burning bush and Jacob at the Jabbok River that dark evening wrestling with God. Once here, I was on my way to the microphone to remove my name from consideration. My heart is in the parish. But a friend, Earl Bleke who now stands in glory, stopped me telling me that I couldn't be Jonah. My response was that there aren't many whales in Tomah. Then there was the life-changing, ministry-changing election; no longer a parish pastor but now a District president; no longer a church planter but now an ecclesiastical supervisor; no longer the pastor of one congregation but now serving 212 congregations.

From the moment of the election on, the convention is a blur. I do remember President Kieschnick saying that the learning curve is vertical; that as a District president I would enjoy good meals, read good books, but may never hear the truth again.

The truth is this office of District president is amazingly complicated. There are responsibilities to the congregations, pastors and commissioned workers of SWD. There are responsibilities to the Synod as a whole. There is the aspect of ecclesiastical supervision that's hard at times to get one's hands around. There are things that I can talk about; but many things that you don't want to know unless you want to stay awake at night. On many days it felt like when I was a small kid putting my feet into my dad's shoes, shuffling across the floor because they didn't fit that well. It's an amazing aspect of our God's grace that he chooses people like us to be his hands, his feet, and his mouth-pieces here in this world...sometimes even taking us out of our comfort zone to serve Him and His purposes.

At this point...before we move on into the rest of this report, I want to recognize those have served in this office of District president in the past. Each of them in their own way has been a blessing for me during the past three years. There are three who still walk on this side of eternity: Rev. Drs. Karl Barth, Ed Suelflow and Ronald Meyer. I thank each of you for the insights and support which you have afforded me over the past three years.

There is one story in particular that sticks out in my memory. It is a conversation which Dr. Barth and I had in October 2006. We were in the sacristy at historic Trinity downtown preparing for a Reformation Service for the Pastors' Conference. Dr. Barth asked me how I was doing. I commented that I missed the parish. His words are branded into my memory, "I still do everyday."

That reminds me of a truth that was learned many years ago: The office should seek the man. It is my opinion that no one can serve in this office of District president unless they miss the parish. Only someone who truly understands the joys and the hurts, the highs and the lows, as well as the great responsibilities of pastoral ministry can fully understand the implications and the complexities of serving in this office as District president.

All that said, it has been an extraordinary honor to serve as president of our South Wisconsin District for the past three years. I thank you for the privilege and the opportunity to do so. There have been challenges, but there have been even greater blessings. There are always opportunities to reflect the Lord's glory in this sin-darkened world. There are fantastic opportunities for us to work together to accomplish something positive for the Kingdom of our God.

Hence the reason for the theme of this 52nd convention of the South Wisconsin District. It is based upon Saint Paul's words to the Corinthians, ***"And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit"(2 Corinthians 3:18).***

Part 2. The Challenges of the past three years

One of the timeless truths that has been reinforced by serving as a District president over the past three years is that opportunities don't come without challenges.

Without a doubt, one of the great challenges of the last three years has been the SWD finances. Formally installed as District president in August 2006, by the end of September it was obvious that as a District we were in financial trouble.

- In September 2006 our SWD deficit grew by \$123,000. We were spending that much money each month more than we were receiving
- A letter sent out of my office in October made the following point: "As of September 30 we have a separate operating deficit for the year of \$812,000. That does not include Camp LuWiSoMo's budget deficit for 2006, for which SWD is responsible."
- Adding in Camp's shortfall our operating deficit was \$880,000.
- We had borrowed extensively from our line of credit in order to make payroll.
- To complicate things there was a capital debt of \$5.5million.

Taking on water faster than we could bail, the commitment was made that SWD would not be the first district to go bankrupt. The commitment was made to bring SWD back onto stable financial ground. The brakes were engaged. Changes were made. Openness, transparency and candor became the watchwords on every level, especially in regard to our financial condition.

Our financial crunch was publicly addressed in November 2006, as Tim Dittloff and I stood before the Fall Pastors' Conference to let everyone know the challenges which we faced. That openness was an important ingredient in dealing with our ballooning debt. It was not merely a matter of stopping the bleeding. It was also about being accountable to the stewards. The dollars which come to us in the District office come from grandmas and grandpas, from working families and from young families with children. Each gift is a precious trust from God's people to be used in support of our common mission and ministry. It is my belief and conviction that District and Synod exist by virtue of and for the benefit of the church. It was vital that the church know what was going on. To be sure it was not an easy conversation. If you were there, you know. Shock and awe now have a new definition which I never want to relive.

At one point during the depths of the financial challenges our Lord blessed in an amazing way. I was in a meeting in one of the back rooms at district office. One of our administrative assistants interrupted. There was a man at the front that wanted to see me. He presented us with a check for \$100,000 stating that he had heard we needed it and could use it in any way that we saw fit. Wow!

What's even more amazing is that the next week, the same man was back. My first thoughts were, Oh! He wants his gift back! Oh my! But to my surprise, he had another check for \$100K. At that point, I thought of Jude's words about entertaining angels, and I wanted to check under his coat to see if there were feathers there. We thanked him profusely; and we still thank our God for that man's faith and his generosity. Those precious gifts were great blessings during challenging financial times.

As part of addressing our financial challenges we made several paradigm changes.

1. We have made the commitment to never again balance our SWD budget based upon projected sale of any property. The SWD board of directors adopted a policy that proceeds from property sales are extra-budgetary.
2. Our SWD financials would be open and published. The statement of activities and now also the congregational receipts are part of the monthly *eConnect* for all to see.

The good news is that we ended 2006 in fairly good shape financially. 2007 was much the same. In 2008 we registered a deficit, as so many did with the October crash. Through May of this year indicates that our congregational receipts are down \$100,000 from congregational intentions. With your help and with our watchful eye we will get our Lord's work done as we fund the mission, and we will end 2009 in the black.

Next on the list of challenges is that of property. SWD owns too much property. That property carries with it a burdensome debt that drains precious resources from mission. Our capitol debt has decreased from \$5.5 million to \$3.7 million dollars over the last three years. But our monthly debt service on those various properties is \$28,600.

To complicate matters, we have been working with one of our mission congregations, specifically Our Savior, Madison, which is \$148,000 in arrears in their interest payments on the property that was bought for their ministry some years back. SWD owns 50% of the building and the mission owns 50% of the building. That arrears will have to be paid back soon so that other mission work

can be started. In addition, Camp LuWiSoMo continues to struggle with nagging deficits, as well as with mounting maintenance issues.

Oh that we had the kind of money spent on those endeavors each month to fund new starts! We are not in the property business. We are not in the brick and mortar business. We are in the Gospel-proclamation business. The dollars that we spend on debt retirement cannot be spent in mission.

The above highlights the reasons why we now operate with a different paradigm in mission starts. We no longer have the luxury of funding mission starts of any kind totally and/or indefinitely. We no longer have the luxury of purchasing expensive properties for mission starts. Regardless of what kind of mission start it is, consistent with our Lutheran theology regarding Church and Ministry a chartered congregation has both the right and the responsibility to call and fund its own pastor. For that reason we are moving away from what have become nothing more than church welfare systems. Mission dollars are too precious to do maintain the status quo.

Part 3. Executive staff adjustments mandated by the finances

Because of our worsening financials in 2006, a reduction in force was mandated. The difficult decision was made that two full-time executives, Rev. Wayne Schroeder in stewardship and Mr. Robert Freymark, our school administrator, were not to be renewed. There were also personnel reductions on the accounting side of things.

Because our financials were in disarray, we needed someone with strong financial skills, someone and with unquestioned integrity, someone who understood our dilemma. In fall 2006 I asked Mr. Ralph Klevenow to come back to help us right the ship. As you may remember, Ralph served as our SWD business manager for many years before his retirement to North Carolina. His keen eye especially in financial matters and his integrity have been and still are a great blessing. His advice is greatly appreciated. Currently Ralph still serves as our SWD treasurer.

As a result of the staff reductions changes had to be made regarding ministry responsibilities.

Four part-time regional school superintendents were contracted: Gene Ladendorf, Roger Laesch, Dave Jording and Denny Vierk. They help to provide greater connection with our schools and professional church workers. Mr. Gary Janetzke was reassigned to center his responsibilities on our Lutheran schools and those on our commissioned roster, while also giving guidance to the youth ministry. In the process our Lutheran schools now receive more attention than in the previous years.

To address the area of stewardship and stewardship renewal Mr. Tim Dittloff who is our LCEF District vice-president, also took up the stewardship role. In Tim's report you will hear that SWD now leads all districts with the number of congregations participating in and being blessed by the "Consecrated Stewards" emphasis. Tim has a great passion for stewardship and we are being blessed by that. Tim also heads up our communication task force. Recently they sent out a "Zoomerang" survey to all pastors. We are currently processing the wealth of information which

was received so that we can better serve and better communicate with the pastors and people of SWD about what we are doing together.

Rev. Dan McMiller also stepped up with added responsibilities, heading up our SWD version of Transforming Congregations, which is called “Rejuvenation.” As part of **Ablaze!** we have made it our goal to help congregations renew themselves so that they can more effectively serve their own members and also reach out into their communities with the Gospel. You will hear more about that later.

The interesting aspect of the staff reductions is that we are doing more with less. Thanks to Tim Dittloff’s passion for stewardship some 20 percent of SWD congregations are experiencing the blessings of the Consecrated Steward process. Monthly Stewardship Learning Communities also now meet.

Thanks to Dan McMiller’s deep mission passion our SWD mission activity is up significantly; more congregations are partnering, collaborating and involved with our various mission efforts. We are reaching more cultures than we ever have within the border of South Wisconsin. We are engaged in training up a new generation of leaders who will help us to reach those who live among us with multi-ethnic and cross-cultural backgrounds. You will hear detail of that throughout the convention.

In December of 2008 one of our Christmas presents was that of Debbie Novak who accepted our offer to become our SWD business manager. Deb’s skills, her knowledge, her integrity, and her passion have been a great blessing for all that we do for the kingdom together. Deb has recently returned to full-time work after a few weeks away for surgery. It’s good to have her smile back in the office!

Part 4. Updates on SWD staff

- **Retirement #1:** Mrs. Arleen Johnson who has served our LCMS for the past 25 years both in the Florida-Georgia District and our own SWD for the past 9 years has announced her retirement effective May 31, 2009. Arleen has served in the SWD office as both as administrative assistant to the president for Rev. Ron Meyer and myself, as well as more recently as our receptionist. We thank our Lord for her many years of faithful service to our Lord and his church, for her cheerful voice on the other end of the phone and for her warm smile to all who walked into our SWD office. Our prayer is that our Lord would grant Arleen good health and much joy as she moves into retirement and that she enjoys her grandchildren!
- **Retirement #2:** Mr. Jim Farrelly who has served our Lord and his church for 45 years has announced his retirement effective June 30, 2009. Jim, a commissioned lay minister, has served our SWD for the past 15 years. He has served in various settings including in the urban areas of Milwaukee to Sheboygan. In recent years he has worked part-time with the Sheboygan circuits, also tagged with human care and older adult ministries. Here too our

prayer is that our Lord would give Jim and Maryls many more years of good health, enjoyment with family, and “good fishin’.”

- **New face on SWD staff:** In the fall of 2007 SWD received a Thrivent grant of \$100,000 to help fund this position. After a lengthy search which focused on getting the right person in the position we set our sites Mr. Chuck Kiehl. We thank Carol Schmeda and Phil Meinzen who helped us in our search. At the end of March Chuck joined our SWD staff as a “mission advocate,” a development position. Among Chuck’s responsibilities are: raising awareness of and funding for our various LCMS and SWD mission projects as well as those in individual congregations. Chuck comes to us with a passion for mission and a passion for raising the stewardship awareness throughout SWD. Chuck is a member of Bethlehem Sheboygan.
- **Gift planning in SWD:** As you know with the financial situation in our country the LCMS Foundation put into effect a reduction of force in early December 2008. Mr. John Meyer, who served for many years as the Foundation’s deferred gift planner in SWD was “rified” as part of their belt tightening. In the wake of loss, SWD is moving into a partnership with Ron Smith and Gift Planning Services so that we can continue providing gift planning services on every level. Ron’s smile and warm personality are familiar to many because of his work in the North Wisconsin District as their gift planner. Our goal is to provide gift planning services to congregations of every size and need. If your congregation is looking for gift planning services, please call the District office. With the help of Ron Smith and working with the Foundation we are looking at new ways to provide gift planning services to our congregations and members... so that the mission of “Bold Witness” can be funded for this generation and the next. A special gift planning seminar is currently planned for Sept. 18 at the District office. It is open to all congregations and pastors.

Part 5. SWD mission priority: Passionate Believers...Changing Life

Sometime back a former District president stated that missions were the engine that drives the district. Another pastor who served in the same circuit with me in Central Illinois taught us that it was his belief that our Lord blesses the church in like measure as it reaches out to the lost. In Holy Scripture our Lord Jesus himself states in the Gospel of Luke: “I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent” (Luke 15:7).



As our SWD staff worked through strategic planning in 2006, we made the commitment to engage the city of Milwaukee with the Gospel as it had never been engaged before, especially as it

touches upon our cross-cultural, multi-ethnic outreach opportunities. That became our number one mission priority. We had our target. The question was, how were we to hit the target?

That challenge became even more pointed at a recent “Missional Summit” which was hosted by the “Pastoral Leadership Institute” for some 25 of our pastors, and which was funded in part by a Thrivent and a very generous grant from the Siebert Foundation. We thank Ron Jones from Siebert who is here. As we discussed priorities and passions, the guiding question became, **“Can the South Wisconsin District be a missional district?”** What would that look like? What would we have to do together and in our local parishes and schools to make that a reality?

One of our pastors, Rev. Randy Raasch of First Immanuel, Cedarburg, and our SWD first vice-president, has described missional with these words:

For me “missional” is applying our strong confessional theology to our daily lives. Missional is the people of God gathering in God’s House where He meets them in the Word and Sacraments and then sends them out into the world to live the difference that Jesus makes—today and eternally. Missional is bringing the never-changing message of life eternal through Jesus Christ to a world that is ever-changing. Missional is using current cultural methods to convey the never-changing message.

Being missional is an essential aspect of our identity as the people of God. Being missional originates in the very heart of God. Saving sinners is the *missio Dei*. That mission is summed up in the words of our Lord Jesus, that we know so well, “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (John 3:16ff).

Jesus was sent into this world, and so are we. We are sent to share the message, sent to share the news of forgiveness. Later in that same Gospel of St. John we hear these words from the Easter Sunday account: “Again Jesus said, ‘Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.’ And with that he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven’” (John 20:21ff).

Like our Lord Jesus before us we have been sent to be about our Father’s business. That business is centered in the Gospel, proclaiming Jesus as Savior. That business is forgiveness and peace with God through our Lord Jesus.

That is an important priority because as you may have seen our South Wisconsin District has the unwanted honor of being the second fastest shrinking district in the LCMS. In 2007 the communicant membership of our SWD congregations declined by 1448. That decline happened even though we are surrounded by a sea of people who do not know Jesus as Savior. The mission field is here all around. Can you see it?

Unchurched people all around. Do you see them? Do you know them? We are in this culture, in this state, in this time, not by accident but because our Lord has placed us here for his very specific

purpose. We are in this culture, in this time armed with the Gospel of our Lord Jesus. We are Lutheran Christians with a unique set of beliefs.

One of the unique characteristics that sets us apart as Lutheran Christians was impressed upon me by Rev. E.J. Otto, who served as SWD mission executive back in the early 1990s. When we started the church in Tomah, there were several large churches in the community. I was concerned. His comment was that we have and proclaim the Gospel like no other church on the face of the earth. We proclaim sin and grace, Law and Gospel. We have Word and Sacraments. We offer free forgiveness because of the blood of Christ on the cross. The list could go on...

The bottom line is: it is time that we just be who we are, whom God has made us. That's the conclusion which the Catholic priest came to during one of our PLI collegial visits in Los Angeles. He told us that he was convinced that they needed to be who they were; Roman Catholic Christians. **We are Lutheran Christians. We are people of grace and people of forgiveness. We are people who care about our vocation as the people of God. We are the people of God in this place and this time, by God's own design, for God's own purpose. We are "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9).**

Let's just be who we are. It is time for us to be Lutheran Christians. It is time for us to be "*bold witnesses*" of the truth which we believe. *Time for us to be passionate believers...changing life; passionate believers engaging our neighbors; passionate believers pointing people to our Savior, His love and forgiveness; passionate believers living out our faith.*

That's all built into our new District logo. Take a look at it. If you have been around South Wisconsin, you know that it formerly was a half empty, or a half-full state, depending on your perspective. Thanks to the talent of Peg Raabe there's a new look...SWD leaning forward...over-arching are the words "Bold Witness"....below are the words... "**Passionate believers...changing life**"...all beginning at the foot of the cross. The cross is where our God changed everything for us. It's in the blood and in the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus.

Moving forward together as *passionate believers...changing life* some exciting things are happening As we align ourselves with our God's passion for sinners and as we work together we are able accomplish more for the Kingdom than we could separately. In fact really great things are happening as we work together for the Kingdom.

There is mission that goes on far beyond the borders of South Wisconsin and we are part of it. For example, we have set our sights on two fields specifically in partnership with LCMS World Mission.

- **World Mission Asia.** Over Christmas 2008 Rev. John Mehl of LCMS World Mission/Asia was in our SWD office. On that day we crafted a "memorandum of understanding" between World Mission/Asia and SWD. Some fantastic growth is taking place with Lutheranism in Asia. Present at that meeting were Dan McMiller, Tim Dittloff, and Rev. Yia Vang who is working here with Hmong in SWD and helping Minnesota South gain a foothold with the Hmong population there. Yia is also working with the Hmong people in

Thailand. Yia's passion is to share the Gospel with those who share his ethnic background. Most have never heard the good news about Jesus. Then, the additional opportunity exists for mission trips to southeast Asia and to Hong Kong. Did you know that World Mission/Asia sponsors 200-plus short-term mission trips to Hong Kong/Macau each year? How about a ten-day trip to help with the mission?

- **World Mission Latin America, focused especially on the Dominican Republic.** From the beginning our expressed involvement with the Dominican Republic project was to demonstrate to the congregations of SWD that the various entities that make up our LCMS can work together and actually get something positive done for the Kingdom. At times it has been a rock-strewn journey; but we are making progress. The Dominican Republic is a place where there is no Lutheran church body. Our SWD involvement began some two years ago. While we are still working on a "memorandum of understanding" with World Mission/Latin America, we are committed to move forward. There is great opportunity. During our trip there last summer with people from Elm Grove Lutheran and Grace, Menomonee Falls, we met many of the leaders of this fledgling church body. They are people like Willie, a dentist, with a passion for the Gospel who hosts a Bible class in his garage. There are Pastors Walter Ries and Ted Krey. There is Danelle Putnam who worked with Dan McMiller during his time in Panama. Danelle is coordinating the human care side of the mission start. Pastor Krey is here with us. We will hear from him later. You can chat with him outside at our SWD booth. Good things are happening in the Dominican Republic, especially on the mission front where the Gospel is being shared with the Dominican people.

But the mission field is not merely in far away lands. The land where we live and where we raise our families is one of the largest mission fields in the world.

Think for a moment about the culture in which we live. Thinking back to the world in which many of us grew up, parking lots and pews were full on Sunday mornings. Thinking back to the world in which many of us grew up, marriage vows were honored, "yours, mine and ours" was only the title of a movie and not the description of most families in our congregations. Thinking back to the world in which many of us were born into the traditional family.

Now things are different. A few weeks back it was reported that 40 percent of children are now born outside of marriage. Many couples that come to be married are now living together before they make their marriage vows. Come Sunday mornings worship runs third to soccer tournaments and hockey matches. Things are so different now that even less than two months back the headline on the cover of *Newsweek* read: "The decline of Christianity." All of which is anecdotal evidence that our culture is different now than when most all of us grew up. We are now outsiders in our culture. The Christian faith and our Christian church are no longer pillars in our society. In many ways our beliefs, our values, our confession is quite alien to the culture in which we live.

That said, it's not time to give up. It's not time to withdraw into our little community of believers. It is rather time to be bold. It is time to engage our communities, time to engage our families and our neighbors. It is time for us to honor our vocation as the people of God in every station of life

where we find ourselves. It is time for us to work together as perhaps we have never worked together before. It is time for us to walk together as generations before us have done.

We have reason to be *passionate believers*. As Lutheran Christians we have been entrusted a fantastic and unique heritage of Law and Gospel. It's a heritage that was passed on to us by generations that have stood firmly on the truth of Holy Scripture. A heritage passed onto us by God's people who clearly confessed their faith to the world around. Ours is the heritage of the Lutheran Confessions and Walther's *Church and Ministry*. Ours is the heritage of the priesthood of all believers. We have and proclaim the Gospel message as no other church has it.

Yet some of our congregations are hurting, many are holding their own, while some are declining. To help pastors and congregations be better equipped to engage this post-church world in which we live, we have established a "Rejuvenation" process in SWD. Under the capable leadership of Rev. Dan McMiller, Bob Gleason (a member of Brookfield Lutheran), along with Rev. Leonard Payton, we have in place a process to help congregations renew their vision and reignite their passion for the lost. Two learning communities have been started. Soon congregational leaders and whole congregations will be involved with the aim of helping congregations better witness to their communities.

Shifting gears a bit, in recent days Dr. Harald Tomesch has become a more familiar face in the District office. Dr. Tomesch is helping us to implement a partnership with our seminaries as we put into action the Specific Ministry Pastor program which was approved at the 2007 LCMS Convention. Dr. Tomesch is crafting a way for us to make that Specific Ministry Pastor program the best that it can possibly be. The need is obvious. At present SWD has 39 enrolled as part of the alternate route to pastoral ministry. Most of those 39 are cross-cultural, multi-ethnic students. As our seminaries move toward distance education, processes like this "**Theological Education Partnership**" will become more important. So that there is no misunderstanding. At this point Dr. Tomesch's work is being funded by direct gifts, and there is hope that a grant or two will become available so that we can continue this all important work of preparing cross-cultural, multi-ethnic men for the pastoral ministry right here in SWD.

Back for a moment to the tagline, "**Passionate Believers...Changing Life.**" Shortly after elected three years ago I was at a Bible class for one of our congregations. The questions were asked, "What does District do? Why do we need the District?" It's a fair and good question. Part of the answer lies in what we have come to call the "3 M's." They have come out of the communication task force which I mentioned a little bit ago. As we began to gather the information from that Zoomerang, one of the laymen on the task force came to the realization that the South Wisconsin District exists to 1) magnify partnerships, 2) maximize resources and 3) multiply ministries.

Magnifying partnerships, we work together with congregations and others to start new mission efforts. Together we can start more new missions and together reach more people than we could alone.

Maximizing resources, pooling our resources especially of our financial resources, our talents and our passions, we are able to accomplish much more together than we could alone.

Multiplying ministries, working together to touch sinners with our Lord's love and forgiveness, we are becoming a multi-ethnic, cross-cultural group of Lutheran congregations right here in SWD.

We have reason to be *passionate believers...bold in our witness. Passionate believers...changing life*. Passionate believers engaging our communities with the Gospel. Passionate believers who love God, who cling to his Word, and who genuinely love our fellow man. Changing life as only Jesus and the Spirit can do that through Word and Sacrament.

It's happening in many of our congregations, in many of our communities. Here are just few of wonderful stories about what we are accomplishing together for the Kingdom:

- **POBLO—People of the Book Lutheran Outreach.** One might wonder why SWD is partnering with POBLO in outreach. The fastest growing religion in the U.S. is Islam. That includes Wisconsin. In May the Milwaukee Islamic Center celebrated 25 years of existence. The Pluralism Project at Harvard lists 22 Islamic organizations in the state of Wisconsin, seven of which are in greater Milwaukee. Others can be found in Madison, La Crosse, Beloit, Kenosha and Platteville. It is time that we share the good news of forgiveness and salvation with our Muslim neighbors beginning right here in SWD with POBLO'S help here, and with POBLO's help throughout the world. Gary Rower and Kahrum Khan will be here later in the convention.
- **First Immanuel, Cedarburg.** When Peace, Saukville, disbanded because the congregation could no longer support itself, Pastor Raasch and God's people stepped up with a vision and a passion to make a difference for the Kingdom. It wasn't about the building or the land; rather it was and is about the Gospel and ministry to the lost. Because of their passion for the Kingdom First Immanuel has raised up from the ashes a new ministry—River of Life, Saukville, a ministry of First Immanuel, Cedarburg. Worship attendance is around 80-90 weekly. They are being served by Pastor Wayne Ahrens, one of the associate pastors of First Immanuel, Cedarburg. One of the new outreach, human care ministries that is beginning at River of Life is "Angel Food Ministries." It's a nonprofit food shelf that helps provide the needy with basic foodstuffs at minimal cost. The pastors and people of First Immanuel are an example of God's "passionate believers changing life."
- **Brookfield Lutheran.** Talk about a congregation with a passion for mission! Brookfield Lutheran is one of our great blessings in terms of financial support for our common mission of reaching the lost. But their passion is measured in more than merely financial support. Under the pastoral leadership of Roger Heintz, BLC has called a graduate of Concordia, St. Louis, to start a new mission to the east side of Milwaukee where re-gentrification is going on. Mark Engelhardt will be ordained later this fall as their missionary to the eastside. It's a unique ministry to the spiritually disenfranchised. BLC is also actively engaged in our ministry at House of Correction in Franklin.
- **Luther Memorial, Shorewood,** is also concerned about the spiritually disenfranchised of Milwaukee's east side. Under the leadership of Pastor Ken Wieting, Luther Memorial has

called a deferred vicar to reach out to the east side of Milwaukee in a more traditional way. Our prayer is that both the efforts of Luther Memorial and Brookfield Lutheran will be blessed so that more will come to know Jesus as Savior.

- **Immanuel, Brookfield.** Rev. Dan Schneider along with people of Immanuel Lutheran are also an example of God's "passionate people changing life." Pastor Dan Schneider is mentor to Vicar Gui Kasongo Kabeo who is serving at Benediction, Milwaukee. Under Pastor Schneider's leadership Immanuel Lutheran is engaged in church plants in Ghana; and has in its sights collaborating with several others to plant a new congregation on the far northwest side of Metro Milwaukee. There is also talk of a new hospital mission in Gui Kasongo's home country of the Congo.
- **Divine Redeemer, Hartland.** Talk about passionate believers! Divine Redeemer is a large congregation being tested. With more than ample reason for the leaders of the congregation to throw in the towel, they have persisted. I commend them for their passion to be and remain faithful to our Lutheran identity and confession. Rev. Jeff Schubert is now their head pastor. Pastors and people together have made it their goal to be a bright shining star proclaiming the Gospel on the far west side. To be sure there are challenges ahead; but with our Lord's blessings their dream of being engaged in mission will become a reality.
- **Covenant, Milwaukee.** Covenant is one of our first revitalization congregations. Pastor Steve Voight has done an excellent job leading the congregation through the process. While the process wasn't perfect, what has happened at Covenant is evidence that things can change for the better when pastor and people work together for the sake of the Kingdom. Covenant and its people are reaching out to their community in ways they haven't done before.
- **St. Paul, Brown Deer.** On May 3, St. Paul, Brown Deer celebrated the public reception of 21 people into the church's family. Longtime members were overjoyed with the event, as were the new members. Pastor David Paape attributes the growth to a simple, clear and enthusiastic emphasis on God's awesome promises for all who trust in Jesus, promises that guarantee that all, to whom the Holy Spirit has given saving faith, are truly "blessed by the Lord!"
- **Concordia University School and Institute for Light (CUSIL).** With the availability of school choice in Milwaukee, LUMIN moved forward to create a new school to share the Gospel with the families and children of urban Milwaukee. This statement is on their website: "Lutheran Urban Mission Initiative (LUMIN) is impacting elementary education in urban Milwaukee through a unique, focused educational model including student learning assessment, dedicated to safety and financial stability. LUMIN currently operates three schools throughout Milwaukee representing 450 students." Under the very capable leadership of Dick Laabs, most recently CUSIL has committed to bringing St. Martini School under wing. The Gospel witness that CUSIL gives in the city is truly a gift of God.

- **St. Martini, Milwaukee.** Pastor Pedro Lopez is working with Pastor Jerry Stecker to birth a new Hispanic mission effort at St. Martini. Worship attendance at this new effort ranges from 45-80 Latinos. There are more than 100,000 Latinos in the neighborhoods around the church. It's time that we start reaching out with a passion to this the fastest growing demographic group in Wisconsin.

- **Benediction, Milwaukee.** It's one of our mission focused congregations on Milwaukee's northwest side. Pastor Don Hougard has skillfully worked with different cultures to broaden the witness that takes place at Benediction. Several of our Hmong pastors trace their roots to Benediction. On any given Sunday worship is conducted in three different languages: English, Hmong and French. The French service is led by Gui Kasongo Kabeo who leads outreach to the African immigrants in Milwaukee. Once a month there are also German services at Benediction.

- **Elm Grove Lutheran and the Chinese Lutheran Fellowship.** Thanks to the leadership of Pastor Larry Myers, Elm Grove Lutheran has opened its doors to a group of Chinese Lutherans who gather for worship and Bible Study on Saturday evenings. On any given Saturday there can be upwards of a hundred in attendance. One from their group is involved in our pre-seminary process.

- **Bethlehem Lutheran, Wales.** Bethlehem was a congregation in deep trouble three years ago. A segment of the congregation left. Their pastor took a call. A beautiful new church building, a huge debt, and a small group of around 100 in worship left the congregation facing serious challenges. It's another congregation that could have very easily thrown in the towel. But they didn't. They made the commitment to move forward with the Lord's help. They called a new pastor, Rev. Allen Behnke who was serving a congregation in Maryland. In the year since Pastor Behnke was installed much has changed for the better. Worship attendance is now 220 a week, offerings are up...excitement is soaring. Word and Sacrament ministry continues. A couple of months ago, a former Buddhist was baptized. The people of Bethlehem, Wales, are an example of God's "passionate believers changing life."

- **Metro Milwaukee Lutheran Mission Society,** formerly known as the Milwaukee Federation. It has recast itself into a mission society. Rev. Mark Wangerin is the chairman. George Lessmann serves as the executive director. The MMLMS is involved in the ex-offender backpack program, as well as various food shelves for the African immigrants in greater Milwaukee. It's an example of how we can demonstrate our Christ-centered love for the whole person; body and soul.

- **Hmong Hope:** On Pentecost Sunday five people were baptized—two babies and three adults. Pastor Yia Vang is also starting a new mission outpost on Milwaukee's near north side. Just the other day Yia wrote this in an e-mail to Pastor Dan McMiller and myself: "On behalf of New Light Lutheran Ministry (Hmong mission at St. Paul, Brown Deer), I would like to thank both of you and the District for covering the cost for George Lessmann, Jr. to write a Siebert Lutheran Foundation grant proposal for the start up of the New Light Ministry."

That thanks is shared with every congregation that is represented here. Together we support our Hmong outreach. At present we support three full-time Hmong pastors: Rev. Yia Vang who was just mentioned, Pastor Blong Vang who serves a group of around 100 at Trinity, Oshkosh, and Pastor Fai Neng Her who serves a similar group at Redeemer, Manitowoc.

- **Bethany, Milwaukee, and Pastor Chris Ikanih.** Bethany was an inner city Milwaukee congregation prepared to close its doors. When they came to the District office with that news, Pastor Dan McMiller, our mission exec, came up with an idea to keep Bethany open with the aim of engaging the community around the church building. Pastor Rick Boeck was the vacancy pastor. In an agreement with the district whereby SWD picks up 50 percent of Pastor Ikanih's salary and the congregation 50 percent, Pastor Chris Ikanih serves the congregation full-time. What blessings have occurred! Those in worship now reflect the community around the church building. Attendance has risen. There has been an amazing number of baptisms at Bethany, 45 on Easter Sunday a year ago; more on the Sundays that followed.

- **House of Correction, Franklin.** Because of financial constraints some difficult decisions had to be made about our full-time presence at the House of Correction in Franklin. For many years there we funded a full-time chaplain at the HOC. A year ago we had to make the difficult decision to eliminate our full-time presence. But that doesn't mean our efforts have lagged. We now share time at the HOC with the Wisconsin Synod. In the place of a full-time worker, we now have two part-time alternative route workers at the HOC, Patrick Batom and Afam Ikanih. They have passion. Worship attendance has risen greatly, to over 100. I am told that on one occasion the room where worship was being held was full and more people were coming. One of the guards tried to stop those coming. Pat Batom intervened, and a second worship site was used that day. Since Palm Sunday there have been more than 78 baptisms at the HOC, spread over different Sundays. The first group was baptized on Palm Sunday. At one point during the service, after the baptisms one of the newly baptized stood to give a testimony. He began reading from the Quran, the guiding book of Islam. He closed it, put it on a table. Pointing to it, he said, "That is a lie!" Then he began to read from Paul's First Letter to Timothy, ending with the words, "There is one God and one Mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus who gave himself as a ransom for all." The newly baptized man continued saying, "He is my Savior. That's why I came to chapel today, to be baptized." There is even a vision of an ex-offender church start.

There are so many fantastic stories of what we are accomplishing together. There are many more. It is time for us to be passionate about our faith. Passionate about our calling as the people of God.

The question is: how will we respond? What will we do for the Kingdom of our God? What are we willing to do for the Kingdom of our God? For me the answer lies in the cross of our Lord Jesus. Look at the sacrifice that he made. Paul talks about it in Philippians 2. Paul writes:

Being in very nature God, [our Lord Jesus] did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:6ff).

Look at the determination which defines Jesus' march to the cross. No temptation could stand in his way. No barrier could prevent him from reaching his goal of the cross. No whip, no crown of thorns, no nail could deter him. He died so that we could enjoy forgiveness. He died so that we can live in the grace of our God. He died so that we might be the children of God. He lives so that we can be His own and proclaim the wonderful message of forgiveness.

Remember what the last words that Jesus speaks to his disciples before he ascends into heaven? Acts 1:8 "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." We are his witnesses in our homes, in our various vocations, in the stores where we shop, in every place where we find ourselves.

Rev. Al Behnke who serves at Bethlehem Wales wrote just this past week...

I have a board in my office that reminds me that I need to connect with others to accomplish great things. Having just celebrated Pentecost and the power that Jesus said He would send, I know that the Holy Spirit has equipped me to reach out to "Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth." I don't want to sit around and discuss what is missional and what is not. I don't have enough time for that. I just want to reach out to people and help them experience this wonderful relationship with Jesus and other Christians that I so graciously enjoy.

Now it is time for us together to step up for our Lord Jesus and out with our Lord Jesus. If it is not us, who? If it is not now, when? If it is not in our homes, in our neighborhoods, in our communities and in our churches, where? Remember Mordecai's words to the hesitant Esther: "Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14).

Our Lord Jesus has given us the royal position of priests in His Kingdom. My invitation...my encouragement is that each of our congregations, each of us as called workers, and each of us as part of the priesthood of all believers understand and live out our vocation to be **"passionate believers...changing life."**

"And we, who with *unveiled faces* all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."

2 Corinthians 3:18

May our Lord bless us!
Rev. Dr. John C. Wille
President SWD-LCMS