

Encourager

MARCH 2026

Mid-South District LCMS



A Message from Rev. Dr. Roger Paavola, President

The Meaning of Lent

Why does it seem so easy for worshipers to graciously accept a message preached from a pulpit that tells them how to live their life? It appears that anyone can teach the law, that is, if we understand the three uses of the law – curb, mirror, and ruler. Telling worshipers how to live their life, how to pull oneself by the boot strap, explain how we just “need to believe” or otherwise telling us what a sanctified life should look like is not Gospel. It’s law!

The law comes naturally to us. The most infant child knows when they’re pushing the limits of what is acceptable behavior. We have had the law’s content knitted into our very bones and sinews. Even Holy Scripture says that every person has the law written on our hearts, so we both know it (sort of) and others can recognize it when they hear it (sort of). The excuses or accusations we default to indicate that we’re trying to find ways to escape the moral code engraved on our hearts by God (Romans 2:15). So, it’s pretty clear, preaching the law is easier to the understanding of the hearers, even if they’re resistant hearers.

It’s easy to see in bad behavior others may do, even if it only seems to be clearly accusing of “those other sinners,” but not so easy to see (or admit and confess) staring blankly in our own mirror. Unfortunately, most of that “lifestyle” preaching delivered from all too many Christian pulpits is really just one or another form of the law. Telling you how to live your life, what you must do, or how to help others is not the Gospel – it’s still just law.

It is far more difficult to preach the Gospel, but yet it is the more important teaching. The Law tells us what God expects of us. The Gospel tells us what God has already done for us through the suffering and death of Jesus Christ... for our sake. This is why the Gospel alone gives to the hearer forgiveness of sins, the promise of life, and the guarantee of eternal salvation. The Gospel is the news that Christ, the Good Shepherd, has done by His death and resurrection to save us poor, miserable sheep from our degraded and fallen existence. The Gospel restores us to His sheepfold freely and without any cost to us. The

Gospel is about what God has done for us in Christ, never what we have done or should do for God. If anyone begins to talk of our works, we're no longer talking about the Gospel, but practically turning the theology of grace by faith upside down.

When teaching youngsters the Six Chief Articles of our Christian faith, I required them to take sermon notes. They were to keep notes on the sermons to which they were supposedly listening to. It was acceptable, that if the youngster's family had traveled to another town, they could take notes on the sermon they heard, using the application of hearing the Scripture, the Law, and the Gospel. One young girl came back to catechism class the Wednesday following her family's visit only to express concern about the sermon she heard at another church. She wondered if it was alright to take notes and mentioned how she might report on the points of the sermon, based on the outlines of Law and Gospel preaching. She said, "Pastor, your outline for our sermon notes asks the question, 'What was the Gospel in the sermon?' What if there were no Gospel in the sermon I heard last week?"

Needless to say, I was relieved that this was not a sermon I had preached! But I wanted to hear more, "What do you mean, there was no Gospel?" Without hesitation, she related that the preacher had given a very good speech about family values in her father's church, and even though she conceded that it might have been a much-needed subject, especially for her own father, it wasn't a sermon about what God has done for His people in Christ. She characterized it as merely a good

speech on getting along in marriage and family.

This young girl understood the Bible's teaching of the Holy Gospel and its importance. All the good advice in the world can never replace the peace and comfort of the Gospel message that the Good Shepherd gave up His life for the sheep. The Gospel is not lifestyle preaching, but the life of Christ preaching. If we don't hear the message of what Christ accomplished for us on the cross, the forgiveness of sin, and the promise of life through Christ, like the young girl realized, we have not heard Gospel.

As we journey through this Lenten Season, it is increasingly more important for us to focus on what Lent is all about. This season shows how our utter failure to keep the Law and allows us the reflective penitence to hear God's solution to our sinful estate. Our unworthiness before a perfect and Holy God does not languish in terror because the Good Shepherd became the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. God died for us that we may live in Him. He rose from the dead to prove our peace with God, now and forever. We journey together, beneath the sacred cross, on that horrible hill where the Lord of Life gave His life to fulfill the Law that we may live by the Gospel forever.

Your servant in Christ Jesus,
Rev. Dr. Roger Paavola





The Mid-South District turns 60 this year! To highlight this great ministry milestone, the monthly Encourager will be sharing a look at the faces, places and moments that have shaped our district over the last six decades.

1966: A New LCMS District Is Born!

The Mid-South District of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod started operating officially as an independent district on January 1, 1967. Unofficially, it began a little earlier—**June 17, 1966**—when the delegates to the final convention of the Western District voted to divide into two new districts: the Missouri and the Mid-South.

Rev. Dr. Wilbert E. Griesse, a member of the Western District’s mission board and pastor of First Lutheran Church in Fort Smith, Arkansas, was elected the Mid-South’s first President. The District was new, but on “day one” it already included 77 congregations in Arkansas, Tennessee and southwestern Kentucky, comprised of 16,933 baptized members (11,460 communicant members), and served by 60 pastors.

Prior to the formation of the Mid-South District, the Western District had been involved in a large-scale and successful mission effort, primarily in the states of Arkansas, Tennessee and southwestern Kentucky—where there were fewer Lutherans. Between 1957 and 1966, 32 new congregations had been established in those states. So the newly-formed Mid-South District was characterized by a “mission-mentality” from its earliest days, driven by the momentum of the huge burst in church-planting activity just before its formation. After being launched on its own in 1966, it was up to the brand new Mid-South District to continue to the trend. Next month, we’ll take a closer look at the District’s early mission growth.



The formal division ceremony of the Western District took place on June 17, 1966. Shown participating in the ceremony are (L to R) Rev. Dr. Arthur Strege (Secretary, Missouri District), Rev. Dr. Herman Scherer (President, Missouri District), Rev. Dr. Oliver Harms (Synod President), Rev. Dr. Herbert Mueller (Synod Secretary), Rev. Dr. W.E. Griesse (President, Mid-South District) and Rev. Paul Donner (Secretary, Mid-South District).



Prior to 1966, Arkansas, Tennessee and southwestern Kentucky (now the Mid-South District) were part of the Western District, which also included the state of Missouri.

Watch for more District history in the April Encourager—and information on a 60th Anniversary Oktoberfest celebration for all to enjoy!

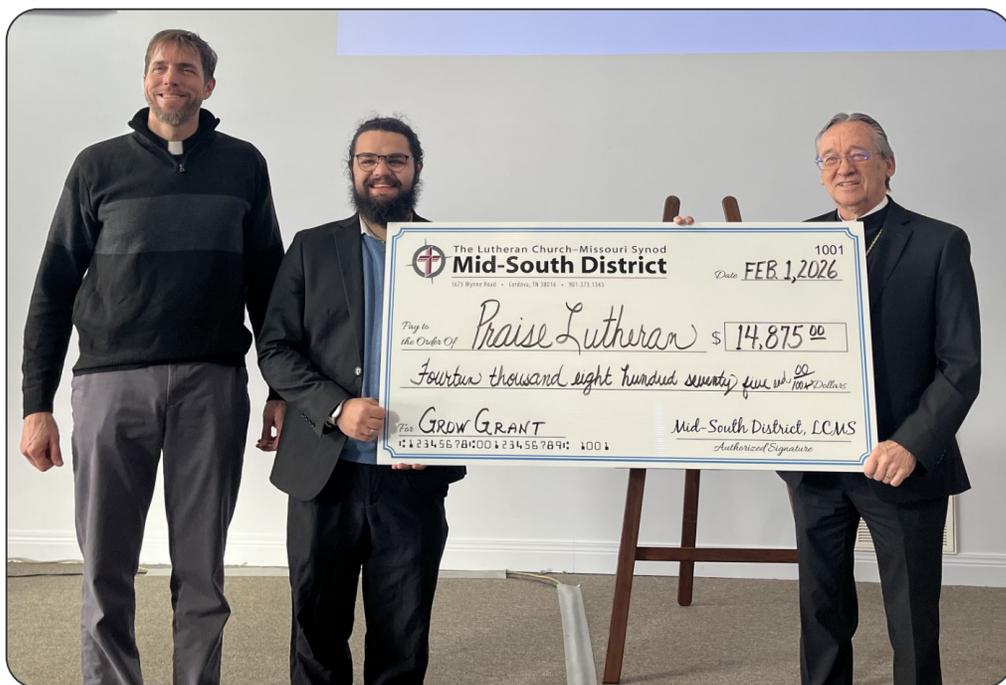
Holy Trinity Welcomes Rev. Dr. Ristau



The Rite of Installation for Senior Pastor was held at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Bowling Green, on Sunday, February 15, 2026 for Rev. Dr. Harold Ristau. Those in attendance included: (Front L-R) President Roger Paavola; Rev. Dr. Harold Ristau; Rev. Sean Smith, Clarksville. (Middle L-R) Rev. David Appold, Circuit Visitor, Paducah;

Rev. Philip Young, Regional Vice-President, Nashville; Rev. Andy Toopes, Emeritus, Bowling Green; Rev. Koh Yamamoto, Paris, TN; Rev. Trae Fistler, Hopkinsville (Top L-R) Rev. James Martin, Clarksville; Rev. Joshua Reifsteck, Murray, KY; and Rev. Dr. Mark Press, Bowling Green.

Praise Lutheran Church awarded Grow Grant



The Mid-South District awarded Grow Grant dollars to Praise Lutheran Church, Maryville, TN for its Music Conservatory and David's Harp program. The program provides music education to the community who is interested in Christian music, playing instruments, and ways of learning music's contribution to worship. Pictured at the grant presentation are (L-R) Rev. Derek Roberts, pastor of Praise Lutheran; Caleb Hesse, music director; and President Roger Paavola.

DISTRICT DISASTER RESPONSE

Clean-Up Continues Following January's Winter Storm

The Mid-South District's primary Lutheran Early Response Team (LERT), Faith In Action, has been hard at work in and around the Nashville area following the late January winter storm that brought heavy ice to the region. Faith In Action has been joined by other LERTs from across the district—and the country—to provide tree work and removal for both congregations and individuals. The team provides regular updates and photos from the deployment on their Facebook page. They also use the page to share a closer look at some of the amazing equipment that makes their work possible. Take a moment to [visit the page](#) and see the great work being done through this ministry.



Working with Shepherd's Heart Disaster Response Ministry from Gardendale, AL

The work of the Faith In Action LERT is supported by generous gifts to the Mid-South District's Disaster Relief Fund. We are so grateful for the faithful work of Faith In Action, as well as the generous support that helps make their ministry possible. If you would like to share encouragement for their work through a gift, please visit mid-southlcms.org and click "GIVE NOW." Gifts can also be shared by check. These gifts should be made payable to Mid-South District LCMS with "Disaster Relief" noted in the memo area. Please send donations by check to:

MID-SOUTH DISTRICT
1675 WYNNE ROAD / CORDOVA TN 38016



Follow FAITH IN ACTION DISASTER RESPONSE for more updates!



Carefully working to take down a damaged tree for a homeowner.



NEW FROM LUTHERAN FAMILY SERVICE: Autism & ADHD Support Groups for Lutheran Families

Families caring for a child diagnosed with Autism or ADHD often carry both deep love and deep challenges. LFS (Lutheran Family Service) is here to walk with you. We are establishing two online support groups designed to strengthen, educate, and encourage caregivers—all through an LCMS theological lens. These groups will meet online at noon throughout the year. The day of the week and the start date will be determined by the preferences and demographics of the participants. You can sign up for the Autism & ADHD Support Groups at <https://lutheranfamilyservice.org/autism-adhd-support-group/>.

CHRIST IS RISEN

1 corinthians 15

..... INDEED

Preparing for the 2026 Synodical Convention: KEY CONGREGATIONAL DEADLINE APPROACHING

LCMS 69th Regular Convention JULY 18-23, 2026

Registration of Voters in the Synod President Election Ends March 8

The 69th Regular Convention of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod will take place July 18-23, 2026 in Phoenix, AZ. An important process happening prior to the Convention is the Synodical President election, which takes place in June. Synod has established a **March 8 deadline** for congregations to complete electronic registration of a pastoral and a lay voter for the election. If your congregation has not yet registered its voters for the presidential election, it is important that you complete this online process right away. The voter registration process began in October, with a detailed letter being mailed to all congregations by the LCMS Office of the Secretary. If your congregation requires a copy of this letter, please contact Missy Washburn (mwashburn@mid-southlcms.com) the Mid-South District Office (901.373.1343).

The Mid-South District seeks to have 100% congregational participation in the upcoming LCMS presidential election. Please make sure that your congregation is taking part. For more on the upcoming Synodical Convention, please visit <https://www.lcms.org/convention/national/official-notice>.

Call for Entries in Sacred Visual Art Exhibition

from CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY-FORT WAYNE

The Sixth Biennial Exhibition of Sacred Visual Art, sponsored by the Good Shepherd Institute of Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne (CTSFW), invites artists to submit works that capture this year's theme, "Let There Be Light," inspired by the anticipated replacement of the windows in Kramer Chapel.



Artists may enter up to three works in the exhibit. Each entry must include an explanation of how the theme inspired the artist. Entries must have been completed within the last seven years. Eligible media are painting, drawing, prints, fiber, clay, wood, metal, and glass. All entries must be the original work of the submitting artist (or artists in collaboration) and not completed as part of a kit or in a classroom.

The entry deadline is July 15, 2026. Works will be displayed in the Wayne and Barbara Kroemer Library on the campus of CTSFW from October 30, 2026, to January 31, 2027. See the complete entry details at ctsfw.edu/gsi-art-exhibit.

LWML MID-SOUTH DISTRICT 2026 CONVENTION

June 12-14, 2026 * Springdale, Arkansas

The LWML Mid-South District cordially invites all the women in the LCMS Mid-South District to attend our 29th Biennial convention in Springdale, Arkansas, June 12-14.

Highlights of the convention include:

- Keynote speaker, Deaconess Dr. Tiffany Manor, Managing Director Mercy, LCMS Office of National Mission
- LWML Representative, Debbie Yocky, LWML Public Relations Director
- Friday evening opening worship at Salem Lutheran Church, Springdale
- Saturday evening banquet with entertainment
- Bible study, singing, and fellowship



— For all the details —



QR code or
<https://www.midsouthlwml.org/district-convention-2026-main-menu/>



<https://www.facebook.com/LWMLMSD>



Email contact@midsouthlwml.org

We hope to see you in Springdale!



Lutheran Women
in Mission
MID-SOUTH DISTRICT

OKTOBERFEST CLASSIC - Mark your calendar



We are excited to announce the first Oktoberfest Classic as a fundraiser for the **Hope Lutheran Church Family Life Pantry, Batesville AR.**

Date: Friday, October 2, 2026

Completed form and payment are due by September 25, 2026

Where: The Course at Eagle Mountain, 800 Gap Rd, Batesville, AR

Registration and questions:

David Goodwin, email: dtgood1990@gmail.com

Dawn Vaughn, email: hoperlutheranfamilylifepantry@outlook.com

LEANING ON HIS EVERLASTING ARMS

***“The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble.
He cares for those who trust in him.” Na1:7***



Each morning in the mountains of Haiti, small feet begin a long walk.

Some of those feet are bare. Some wear shoes that are too large, handed down from someone else. Some are covered by mismatched sandals. The road is uneven and dusty, stretching farther than a child’s legs should have to travel.

Yet they walk.

They walk toward a small school building, which may be no larger than a single car garage. They walk toward a wooden bench and a simple desk. They walk toward a meal. They walk toward the Word of God.

In one classroom sits a very young child who has only recently begun school. His small body carries the quiet signs of hunger; rust colored hair and a heaviness in his eyes. He leans slightly against the desk as if his strength has been borrowed for the day.



Beside him are older children. They are smiling. They know what is coming. They know that before the day ends, there will be food. They know that they will sing out in praise. They know that they will be reminded that they belong to Jesus.



These children do not lean on comfort or security. They do not lean on systems or savings. In many ways, all they have to lean on is the Lord.

And He is faithful.

Through your generosity, God provides the meal that strengthens their bodies and the Gospel that strengthens their hearts. In a place where resources are few and the road is long, they are learning to trust the One who is their refuge.

They are leaning on His everlasting arms.

Trinity HOPE is a US based ministry that feeds over 67,500 children in 300 Christian schools in 16 districts throughout Haiti. We share the Gospel of Jesus Christ one bowl of rice and beans at a time. At a cost of about \$0.38 per meal, we are able to provide over 1.3 million meals each month. To learn more, visit our website at www.TrinityHOPE.Org.

Prayer Summary, February 2026

Following is a list of all the people that have appeared on the Mid-South District website prayer list www.mid-southlcms.com during the month of February.

PRAYER CONCERNS

REV. RONALD HALAMKA (Waxahachie, TX)
MRS. ALISON HAWKINS (Mid-South District Office)
MRS. MARY ANN HERD (wife of Rev. Clifford Herd, Hixson, TN)
REV. TOM SAYRE (Emeritus, St. John's, FL)
REV. DR. MARK PRESS (Emeritus, Bowling Green, KY)
REV. RON BACIC (First, Little Rock, AR)
REV. ALBERT EICHELBERGER (Emeritus, Knoxville, TN)
REV. MYLES SCHULTZ (Pastor, Grace Lutheran Church, Holiday Island, AR)
REV. DR. LEE HAGAN (District President, Missouri District)
MRS. NANCY CALLIES (wife of Rev. David Callies, Emeritus, Former District President MDS)
MS. JUDY OTTO (Holly Springs, MS - MDS Editor Lutheran Witness Supplement)
MRS. FLORENCE EICHELBERGER (wife of Rev. Albert Eichelberger, Knoxville, TN)
MRS. NORMA MOORE (wife of Rev. Tom Moore, Emeritus, Cordova, TN)
MRS. JUNE WIESE (wife of former MDS Pastor, Rev. Ron Wiese)
MS. STEPHANIE ELSEROAD (daughter of Rev. Rich Elseroad (EM) Knoxville, TN)
MR. ROBERT NERGER (Former Mid-South District Board of Directors, Wartburg, TN)
MRS. DONNA MARSHALL (wife of Rev. Stewart Marshall, Trinity, Pine Bluff, AR)
Mr. JEREMY HOWE (Huntsville, AL)

CALL UPDATE

VACANT CONGREGATIONS & MINISTRIES

ACCEPTED: REV. GERALD HEMMINGSON, Emeritus, Joplin, MO accepted the Call to serve as pastor to First Lutheran Church, Harrison, AR. *Installation took place February 1, 2026.*

REV. DR. HAROLD RISTAU, Luther Classical College, accepted the Call to serve as Senior Pastor to Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Bowling Green, KY. *Installation took place February 15, 2026.*

REV. DANIEL GRAY, Pastor to Martin Luther Chapel, Pennsauken, NJ, accepted the Call to serve as Pastor to Concordia Lutheran Church, Kingsport, TN. *Installation took place February 15, 2026.*

REV. NICHOLAS BELCHER, Candidate, Cabot, AR accepted the Call to serve as Pastor to St. Titus Lutheran Church, Maumelle, AR. *Installation took place February 7, 2026.*

PENDING: REV. KEVIN MCREYNOLDS, Pastor to Redeemer Lutheran Church, Mountain Home, AR, received a Call to serve as Pastor to Grace Lutheran Church, Wayne, NE.

DECLINED: REV. JD ZISCHKE, Pastor to Restoration Lutheran Church, Fayetteville, AR returned the Call to serve as Pastor to Resurrection Ministries, Brentwood, CA.

VACANT CONGREGATIONS & MINISTRIES

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Chattanooga, TN – Senior Pasto

IN THE CALLING PROCESS - COMMISSIONED MINISTERS
Our Savior Lutheran Academy, Nashville, TN – Full-time PreK Teacher; Full-time and Part-time Preschool Teachers and Aides

Christ the King Lutheran School, Memphis, TN – Director of Christian Education

First Lutheran School, Knoxville, TN- Middle School Math; Several part time teaching positions



Congregational Mission Commitments

Mission Commitment Receipts as of 1/31/2026 (1 Month)

Anticipated Amount
(8.3% of budget)..... \$137,388
Actual Receipts 86,315
Over (under) anticipated
amount..... (\$51,073)

Use of Mission Commitment Receipts (1 Month)

Allocated to Synod for World
Missions \$23,811
Allocated to Tanzania 2,083
Retained for District Mission/Ministry
Support (70% of receipts) 60,420
Total Receipts \$86,315

Mission Commitment Receipts Prior Year Comparison (1 Month)

Actual Receipts as
of 1/31/2026 \$86,315
Actual Receipts as
of 1/31/2025 \$94,837
Over (under) prior year
receipts (\$8,522)

Share your news with us!

Encourager Topics in 2026

We invite you to share your stories with us please email stories by 20th to Rhonda, webmaster.contact@mid-southlcms.com. Here's a look at the upcoming topics for 2026.
April — Volunteers
May — Small Town & Rural Ministry
June — Leadership

Lutheran Witness Supplement

The monthly deadline is the 15th. Please email your original high resolution digital photo (.pdf or .jpg files only) and a short paragraph, to The Lutheran Witness Supplement editor, Judy Otto.
Email: lw.contact@mid-southlcms.com
phone: 662-252-1004. Judy will always acknowledge receipt of your submission if it is sent directly to her.

Mid-South District, Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod

Staff

Rev. Dr. Roger Paavola,
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Angela Fowler,
Executive Director for Business & Finance
Michelle Fischer,
Executive Director for Education, Youth & Family
Scott Roberts,
LCEF Vice President
Missy Washburn,
Executive Assistant to the District President
Rena McElwain,
Communications & Marketing Specialist
April Jones,
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Lisa Pennington,
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