



[bedrock buzz]

Saturday
6-14-25

NEWS OF THE 22ND REGULAR CONVENTION OF THE MID-SOUTH DISTRICT, LCMS — JUNE 12-14, 2025

Friday Election Results

A number of key elections took place on Friday morning, with more taking place on Saturday. The following elected positions were determined by ballots on Friday morning:

District President —

Rev. Dr. Roger Paavola

First Vice President —

Rev. Joshua Willadsen

Second Vice President —

Rev. Kevin Conger

Third Vice President —

Rev. Phillip Young

Fourth Vice President —

Rev. David Graves



Complete election results will be shared on the Convention Page of the Mid-South District website:

mid-southlcms.com/convention-2

Unwinding at the President's Reception...



For more photos from the President's Reception and other 2025 Convention moments, visit the Convention Page on the Mid-South District website.



Friday's Pages: Jane Cole (Concordia-Jackson), Laqueta Ferguson (Immanuel-Memphis), Diane Reimold (Immanuel-Memphis)

Convention Pages Have It Covered!

How do you handle all the big and small, expected and unexpected needs at an event like the Mid-South District Convention? You enlist the help of amazing volunteers to serve as Pages. This year, Diane Reimold (Immanuel-Memphis) has headed up the team of Pages serving Thursday through Saturday at the Convention. They've assisted by distributing important delegate materials, relaying messages, and addressing a variety of other needs that popped up. The Mid-South District is incredibly grateful to the following for serving as Pages for this year's Convention:

- Emma Petering (Immanuel-Memphis)
- Sylvia Ruppel (Immanuel-Memphis)
- Lynn McDonald (Messiah-Memphis)
- Dennis Barden (Immanuel-Memphis)

ANGELS WITH FUR?

Feature by Judy Otto, Editor of the Lutheran Witness Mid-South District Supplement

Love comes in all shapes and sizes—and it often comes covered in fur, as every pet owner knows. Indeed, many believe that “Dogs are angels with fur,” as a favorite refrigerator magnet claims.

But Lutheran Church Charities—the same entity that created the Disaster Response Ministry and training program that educates and prepares our Mid-South Lutheran Early Response Team (LERT) volunteers to respond to disaster-stricken communities with aid, support, and comfort—also evolved and refined the previous concept of the therapy dog, creating a unique K-9 Comfort Dog ministry that brings unconditional love and comfort to those impacted by disaster and loss.

According to Lutheran Church Charities (LCC), their K-9 Comfort Dogs and handlers provide a safe, comforting and calming presence for those who experience fear, isolation, hopelessness and uncertainty. The ministry also provides a vital service to people who have undergone human-caused trauma or natural events.



Job

The Mid-South District's LCC K-9 Comfort Dog is a handsome and lovable Golden Retriever named Job, deployed from Christ the King Lutheran Church in Memphis and handled by Genie and David Swan.

By human standards, Job has achieved celebrity status: he has thousands of followers on Facebook and is recognized and welcomed regularly with hugs and pets by the children at Christ the King Lutheran

School, as well as at nursing homes, assisted living facilities, hospice houses, senior centers, other schools and libraries—anywhere love and comfort are needed.

But where Job's special talent and training shines is when disasters strike communities, and survivors are facing the disorientation and shock of loss and struggling to process it.

In March 2018 Job was deployed to Parkland, Florida, after the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglass High School, where 17 people lost their lives when a gunman opened fire. He was one of 19 LCC K-9 Comfort Dogs from across the nation to visit the students, giving and getting love. By the second or third day, the children started opening up and talking to Job about their experience and their feelings; on the third and fourth days they were talking to their counselors.

On September 23, 2021, a gunman went inside the Kroger grocery store in Collierville, Tennessee, armed with multiple guns and started firing. According to local media, 15 people were injured, 70-year-old Olivia King was killed, and the gunman was found with a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

In November, for community members at the survivor's forum, Job was a listening ear and a friendly face. He was invited to the dedication of the new Collierville Associate Resource Center, where mental health services, trauma counseling and victim advocacy services—and a dog named Job!—continue to support associates, first responders, survivors and the community impacted by the tragedy.

Job was presented by Kroger leadership with a comfortable bed to use during his visits to the counseling center, where his calming and listening presence are welcomed.

In June 2024, K-9 Comfort Dog Job traveled to Fordyce, Arkansas, the scene of a shooting at the Mad Butcher grocery store, where four were slain and ten wounded, including two law enforcement officers. He and his handlers from Christ the King, Memphis, were joined by K-9 Comfort Dog Persis from King of Kings, Glenpool, Oklahoma, to offer comfort to survivors of the mass shooting, families impacted by the tragedy, and the community's first responders.

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FAITH IN ACTION: MSD Disaster Relief Ministry Responds During Record-Breaking Season

Part 2 of a Feature by Judy Otto, Editor of the Lutheran Witness Mid-South District Supplement



Chainsaw operator and devoted volunteer Larry Oltmann of Grace Lutheran Church in Clarksville, TN works on downed trees during a deployment in Morgan County, TN.

A GROWING NEED

Fistler estimates that recently their team has been called to respond about once a month on average—and the frequency of those calls has increased.

“Where we live it’s becoming known as the new Tornado Alley; they call it the ‘Dixie Alley’. It seems like every year there are more destructive EF3 and EF4 tornadoes, and they’ve been going through populated areas and cities, doing considerably more damage to both property and people.”

They’re also learning of

more ‘repeat’ tornadoes that follow a previous path.

“A tornado went through Wartburg, Tennessee, less than a year before the recent recurrence. I just learned that in Batesville, Arkansas, where we spent a week on cleanup two months ago, another tornado hit the same neighborhood a week later.”

He believes that one reason they’ve received more calls could be that their team has become increasingly more recognized and well-equipped.

“The District has received so many generous donations that we’ve gotten new equipment: a dedicated Disaster Response truck, a skid steer, a second skid steer in Knoxville, and a lift that we can use to do tree work at extended heights. I’m going through classes to become a certified tree climber, as well. All these things add up, so when other teams from other districts need help, they call us.”

In some places, he notes, a major disaster creates a long-term ongoing need. Hendersonville, NC, is a famous example, where tree cleanup from Hurricane Helene will likely continue for months or even years.

“Synod is fully supporting us there, and the local LCMS group is still bringing in volunteers, feeding, housing and sending them out to work, while Synod provides grants for people who are recovering and rebuilding. When FEMA pulled out of Hendersonville in February, ours was the only disaster response group still actively working in the area; so all of the people requesting help were redirected to us by FEMA. Because FEMA has been called to respond to so many ongoing and new disasters their resources were badly needed elsewhere. So we’ve been sending volunteers to help with the massive need in Hendersonville.”

Because Ludwig agrees that future need for disaster response teams is likely to increase, he urges people to volunteer to come and learn the basics, joining the chainsaw teams if they’re so inclined.

“There’s a lot that can be done by volunteers. The ladies claim they can’t operate a chainsaw, but we’ve had quite a few of the ladies who have gone through the chainsaw training; and there are many other needs they can handle. Somebody has to prepare the food, maintain the place where we stay, take

phone calls, and help line up the assessments, or participate in the assessments.

“Our preference is not to go out on assessments alone. If at all possible we’d rather have two people on an assessment visit. While I’m the engineer doing the assessment, I can walk around, look at the residence and the trees and determine what needs to be done. Meanwhile, somebody else can talk to the resident—converse with them about what happened, the losses they have suffered, and comfort them while their partner wanders around and does the legwork.”

THE HARDEST PART OF DISASTER RESPONSE

The hardest thing, says Fistler, when questioned, “is to come back home and say we wish that we could have done more.

“We have to entrust those who have suffered losses into God’s hands and to the local congregation that we’re working out of,” he tells us. “In Hendersonville, for example, it is through Mount Pisgah Lutheran church that I can share with their pastor the information of families that we helped, and he can follow up and minister to them and their needs. It’s hard to be there for people and recognize those really dire needs that they have, and then just have to leave.

“But we’re thankful,” he adds, “that we do have those resources in the local congregations—which is the whole basis for what we do. It’s the church responding as volunteers through a local congregation; that local congregation can be a beacon of hope and a source for them to identify that this is who’s helping you—it is the local Lutheran church, and you can go to them for help in the future as well as for spiritual needs.”

Ludwig also recalls scenarios that are difficult to navigate emotionally.

“Last year we held a LERT chainsaw class in Batesville; one of the local congregation members offered us his property, where he had a lot of trees down or in need of being taken down, so we had a good place for the chainsaw students to practice. Last month we were called to that same property to clean up storm damage.

“While we were there, the local administrator gave us a list of properties that had reported significant damage that we needed to assess in order to provide appropriate assistance. One small ‘zipper’ prefabricated home showed a lot of damage. When I explained the reason for my visit, the lady of the house invited me in to do my paperwork, and explained that her husband was in bed with the flu, she thought, since he had gotten very cold and very sick from being out walking around in the rain Friday night.

“I asked why they were walking in the rain Friday night, which is when the tornadoes came through, and she said, ‘We were looking for my mother.’

“‘Is she okay?’ I asked; and the lady replied, matter-of-factly, ‘She died. We lost four trees and my mom.’”

Shaken by this bald presentation of such a terrible loss, Ludwig later reflected that “This is when a LERT volunteer should be sitting there and talking to her while I’m wandering around counting trees in the yard.”

Dealing with those heart-wrenching stories is difficult, he admits. “That’s where the Basic LERT training comes in. You have to be able to talk with these people and understand their problems and what they’re experiencing and give them reassurance that they will be taken care of.”

As a startling postscript, Ludwig adds that several weeks later they heard from the Batesville pastor that another tornado had followed the same path and impacted the same people their team had helped.

“We weren’t asked to go back—they had nothing left to lose,” he said.

For such difficult moments, Ludwig has some cards printed with a brief prayer: "Dear Lord, I know that nothing will happen to me today that you and I cannot work through together."

"I hand that card to these folks and tell them to put it in their pocket and keep it with them all the time: 'Grab it next time it rains real hard or the roof caves in on you!'"

THE BLESSINGS AND REWARDS

Fistler recalls helping a family in Little Rock with a newly purchased house, impacted by a tornado on the day they were supposed to be moving in. The tornado damaged 16 pine trees in their back yard and delayed their move, leaving them to deal with a \$20,000 estimate for professional tree removal.

"When you've just bought a house, you don't have that kind of spending money, and insurance isn't going to cover it because they only cover insured structures," he points out. "So we spent almost a week on their property, getting to know them as we cut 70' to 80' tall pine trees into 6" slabs and carried them from the back to the front yard up some railroad tie steps to get them to the road. The husband didn't know how to use a chainsaw and the wife had just had a miscarriage and was also allergic to pine trees—so she couldn't even be in the back yard.

"While we were there," he says, "some contractors showed up to replace the roof. We asked them what was wrong with the roof, and they said it needed to be replaced, and they were going to bill the owners for it.

"We called the homeowners, who had already had their roof inspected by the insurance company and told there was nothing wrong with it. The roofers intended to replace the whole roof and then likely charge the homeowners an inflated price. So the owners asked us to tell the roofers to leave the property.

"We learned much later that the family had contacted our previous DDRC, Jan Simko, and told her that they had started going back to church. 'We hadn't been to church in years, but we started going back after what you guys did to help us out. We saw the Lord working through that, and we're now in church on Sundays.'

"It's a blessing," Fistler recognizes. "In the midst of all the loss and suffering, God uses these moments to bring people back to the fold."

Ludwig shares a blessing, as well:

Toward the end of their work in Valdosta, he received a call from the Bethlehem congregation in Johnson City, TN, asking if the LERT team could help them dig out from ongoing problems left behind by Hurricane Helene.

On his tour of inspection, Ludwig discovered that at this point, two weeks after Helene's passing, they were primarily dealing with flood damage. In the areas he checked, there were no trees that could be cut.

"The only trees were left in piles of debris that were impregnated with dirt and sand and rocks and there was nothing that you could safely do with a chainsaw without ruining the equipment. So I had to say I was sorry, but there was nothing we could do to help them.

"I went home feeling bad because I couldn't help them—but then in January we got a call from the District Office and they said they had grant money sent specifically for disaster relief in East Tennessee. So I was able to call the church back and return to Johnson City, where I spent a week taking grant applications and handing out gift cards to take care of immediate needs. After we reviewed and approved more than 30 applications, we were able to disburse \$236,000.

"It was great to go out and talk to some of those people and learn about their situations. We were able to help one 93-year-old U.S. Air Force veteran rebuild his house and recover some of his losses. He had lost 110 huge round hay bales for their cattle, that had floated away and were gone—like everything else.

"The approved grants are for money the recipients can use however they

choose, to replace whatever they feel is most important. It has no strings attached and we don't require reporting or photographs substantiating the proper use of the funds, like a lot of other agencies. We say, 'Fix whatever you need to fix, and bless you!'"

A FINAL APPEAL

Currently the Mid-South District has 150 LERT volunteers from 20 congregations. Hopkinsville, Batesville, Knoxville, Clarksville and Rogers have their own chainsaw teams.

So what does the Mid-South District's Disaster Response Team need most:—more volunteers, more funding, more faith?

"All of the above!" Fistler replies. "A lot of people think it's just me and my Faith in Action team, but more volunteers are always needed, so if there are congregations out there that would like to become active, we'll teach them, too, and get them involved!

"We're just grateful that in recent years we've had so many generous donations. Whenever I request equipment from the district, they just ask how much I need, and it's done. And that's such a blessing, because there are many districts that don't have that support! It makes their job that much harder; they have to cut trees and then carry them by hand or wheelbarrow. We can move them in 10- or 12-foot sections with the skid steer and get so much more work done. It's a huge help for us and a huge blessing!"

Ludwig agrees, and points out that "When we have a disaster and we need people to show up, we bring a team from Hopkinsville and we may have four or five guys who are readily available. A lot of them are retired so they can pack up and go whenever they want to. But folks who are working for a living can't just hop in a truck and say I'll be back in two weeks, boss! So we can always use more volunteers!

"At Valdosta, we had help from 2 or 3 Texas volunteers, and several came up from Florida—they were working with us to help Valdosta while they were watching Hurricane Milton go through Florida where their own homes were at risk! The guys from Texas learned that the need was greater in Augusta, (GA), so they headed up to help Augusta after spending several days with us.

"There's a whole community of these guys who follow disasters," he notes. Not storm chasers, but like our MSD Disaster Response crew, helpers and healers in the wake of the storms.

Let's remember them all in our prayers.

How to help Mid-South Disaster Relief

VOLUNTEER:

Go to www.lcms-lert.org, sign up and receive notifications for trainings and deployments.

CONTACT:

Kurt Ludwig at kjludwig@msn.com or 901-304-0809

Rev. Trae Fistler at pastor@faithhopkinsville.com or 515-571-1378

SUPPORT:

Mail to the Mid-South District Disaster Relief efforts and expenses by mailing your check payable to the Mid-South District and designated for the 'Disaster Relief Fund', addressing it to Mid-South District, 1675 Wynne Road, Cordova, TN 38016. Give Online on the District website mid-southlcms.org and hit the GIVE button.

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Both comfort dog teams were invited to return for the store's reopening 12 days later, to listen, grieve, provide comfort, pray and show care to those hurting throughout the community.

In September 2024, Job and his handlers were one of the nine LCC K-9 Comfort Dog teams that traveled to Winder, Georgia, to help community members recovering from the Apalachee High School shooting, where a 14-year-old student allegedly killed four people and injured nine others.

Lutheran Church Charities has dispatched over 130 Comfort Dogs in 27 states. Their job is to share love with anyone who needs it; and no one does it better than Job!

Like Job, all LCC K-9 Comfort Dogs are specially bred Golden Retrievers who are trained by LCC professional canine trainers at one of their Illinois facilities. Volunteers foster the dogs during their training, which involves 2,000 hours over an 18-24 month period. When dogs meet the program standards, they are placed with a participating congregation to continue training with LCC K-9 Comfort Dog trained handlers.

More Comfort Dogs are needed, joining those who have served in the aftermath of historic disasters such as Superstorm Sandy, the Sandy Hook Elementary School mass shooting, the Boston Marathon bombing, and several more disasters and shootings that have occurred since LCC president and CEO Tim Hetzner was first inspired to create this ministry in 2005—in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

At that time, he participated in LCC's disaster response by helping rescue homeowners who had pets, and this experience helped him to recognize the extraordinary strength of the bond many people enjoy with their dogs.

When LCC staff returned to Chicago following Katrina, they began to borrow dogs to take to disaster scenes to comfort victims. When a mass shooting occurred on the Northern Illinois University campus in February of 2008, LCC was given special access to grieving students and faculty because of the dogs.

This is when Hetzner felt God was sending him a message: "Don't wait for disasters. Place dogs in churches." That same year LCC acquired its first four K-9 comfort dogs, two of which were assigned to churches. From there, the program proved to be increasingly popular with Lutheran church congregations.

"Comfort dogs are consistent with the LCC mission: The LCC K-9 Comfort Dogs are a bridge for compassionate ministry, opening doors for conversation about

Scientists confirm that the calming effects of petting a comfort dog can contribute to lowering blood pressure and reducing heart rates. Peer-reviewed studies indicate the health and psychological benefits of dog-human interaction is related to the release of oxytocin, a naturally produced peptide hormone and neuropeptide that also plays a role in social bonding, reproduction, childbirth, the period after childbirth, and it is associated with characteristics such as generosity, trust, and the modulation of inflammation and wound healing.

We Know that God is Love; He sent dogs to remind us to share that love.

faith and creating opportunities to share the Mercy, Compassion, Presence and Proclamation of Jesus Christ to those suffering and in need," their website explains.

"LCC K-9 Ministry teams do not proselytize but rather are a ministry of presence bringing comfort, a listening ear and prayer. When the Lord calls, we must go and serve Him. Isaiah 6:8 tells us, *"Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I. Send me.'"*

"We only go where we are invited, and we never charge those we serve."

If you would like to learn more about adding this wonderful outreach ministry to your congregation's effort, visit the LCC website at <https://www.lutheranchurchcharities.org/k-9-comfort-dogs-about.html>.

WELCOMING NEW WORKERS to the Mid-South District

The Mid-South District welcomed 13 newly ordained and 14 newly commissioned workers to the district family on Friday morning. We are pleased to have these workers as part of the Mid-South District!

ORDAINED—

Jacob Childers
Patrick Miles Cox II
Trae Fistler
Randall Lewis
Anthony Johnson
Jeremy McDonald

Chase LeFort
Matthew Lynch
James Martin
Addison Pope V
Joshua Schooping
Charles Shemwell
Koh Michael Yamamoto

COMMISSIONED—

Pamela Chatham
Christina Childers
Lauren Chumbley
Gracie Griffin
Aaron Jackson
Jonah Kaufman
Linaya Kolke
Benjamin Kuefner
Nathan LaBorious
Jacquelyn Magnuson
Robin Moyer
Amy Waltz
Brittany Webb
Teresa Young



Connecting at the Pastors' Wives Luncheon



Wives of pastors attending the 22nd Regular Convention were invited to attend the Pastors' Wives Luncheon on Friday afternoon. Mrs. Pat Paavola, wife of District President Rev. Dr. Roger Paavola, has hosted this event for the last several conventions, offering the women a chance to meet other wives of pastors across the district and connect over common interests and experiences. Mrs. Paavola is currently working on another opportunity for these ladies to get to know one another at the upcoming Pastors' Wives Retreat, taking place



in Memphis in the fall. Wives of pastors across the district should watch for an invitation to this relaxing weekend event in the coming weeks!

For more photos from the Pastors' Wives Luncheon and other 2025 Convention moments, visit the Convention Page on the Mid-South District website.

Look for the last edition...

The last edition of *bedrock buzz* will be sent to delegates via email and also be available on the 2025 Convention page.

District videos of the Faithfully Departed, Disaster Relief Ministry and GROW Grants will be shared on Vimeo at <https://vimeo.com/midsouthlcms>.

Catch All the Convention Highlights!

Voting Results of the Mid-South District Convention are available at mid-southlcms.com/convention-2



Scan the code to visit the 2025 Convention Page