

Encourager

JULY 2026

Mid-South District LCMS



A Message from
Rev. Dr. Roger Paavola,
President

The Year of the Semiquincentennial

Have you ever heard of something called a “Semiquincentennial”? It doesn’t appear in many publications on a regular basis, nor is Semiquincentennial normally a part of our daily and casual conversation. But be prepared! There is a Semiquincentennial coming. In case you are trying to dissect that word, it is simply the Oxford way of saying a 250th anniversary.

On July 4, 2026, these United States of America will join together to commemorate and celebrate our 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. This is an historic milestone and opportunity to pause and reflect on our nation’s past, to honor the contributions of all Americans, pay tribute to those who sacrificed their lives for this country, to honor the privileges we share as citizens of this country, and look ahead toward the future about what we want to create for the next generation and beyond. America’s Semiquincentennial will feature many times of sharing our American story, inviting us all to show our patriotism for what America means to us.

Is there a background story to this Semiquincentennial? The debate over whether

America was founded on religious principles is an ongoing subject of historical discussion. While the founders were deeply influenced by Judeo-Christian ethics and sought to protect religious liberty, they established a strictly secular government separated from any official state religion. Scholars widely agree that the founders, many of whom practiced varying forms of Deism and Enlightenment-era Protestantism, created a system where faith could thrive freely without the state endorsing, dictating, or favoring any particular religious belief—the old “Freedom of Religion” argument.

The document of The Declaration of Independence (1776) clearly appeals to the “Nature’s God” and a “Creator” as the source of universal human rights but does not mention Jesus Christ or any specific religious doctrine. The U.S. Constitution (1787) Contains no references to God, Christianity, or the Bible. It explicitly prohibits religious tests for holding public office (Article VI) and to ensure an open, pluralistic democracy. The First Amendment (1791) within the First Ten Amendments, known as the Bill of Rights, prevents the government from establishing a state religion (Establishment Clause) and protects the free exercise of religion. Recent tests of the First

Amendment done by anti-religious bodies wish to change the Amendment to be a “freedom from religion,” and not a freedom of religion.

Where does that leave us? It leaves us with a clear demarcation between the church and the government. However, that demarcation in many situations has become less clear and somewhat trespassed. Recent events around the world give us evidence of the assault on religion—specifically Christianity. In Finland, for example, the Bishop of the Finnish Lutheran Mission Society—Rev. Dr. Johanna Puhlohja and a ranking member of the Finnish Parliament, Dr. Paivi Raasanen, were found guilty of “hate crimes” for publishing a document that explained the biblical position of marriage. The courts dismissed anything in the indictment that had to do with Scripture, but stated that the statements from Scripture in the public square (publications) could be offensive to some. In Canada, it is possible for a pastor to be charged with a federal offense for similar statements as is the case in the Finnish issue. Preaching or teaching are now subject to the scrutiny of federal mandates.

So, what does that leave us with today? The Bible chronicles Christ’s disciples were charged with the “crime” of proclaiming the Gospel of Christ in the public square. The Apostles Peter and John (Acts 4 & 5) were arrested by the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council, for preaching about Jesus and healing a crippled man. They were jailed overnight, but continued to preach, leading to a second arrest where they were miraculously freed from prison by an angel. St. Paul and Silas (Acts 16), while teaching the Gospel in the Roman city of Philippi, were stripped, beaten, and thrown into a maximum-security prison. An earthquake at midnight broke their chains and opened the doors. However, they did not escape, thereby preventing the jailer from losing his life for allowing an escape. Their choice to remain jailed led the jailer and his entire family to be baptized and become followers of Christ Jesus.

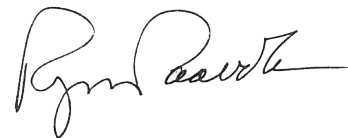
During the earthly ministry of Jesus, Roman authorities were faced with a dilemma about the role Jesus followed by preaching the difference between earthly kingdoms and the Kingdom of God. During His trial before Pontius Pilate, Jesus, in John 18:36, explained that His authority and reign

did not originate from human power. If it did, His followers would fight with weapons to defend Him. Instead, His rule as King is in the heavenly realm that supersedes earthly powers in truth and love. The Gospel proclaimed Jesus as “King of Kings,” which the Romans often viewed as a political threat or an act of sedition (rebellion against Caesar).

The Kingdom of Christ has its origins in the divine, not a political or military power. Jesus was simply clarifying that His ministry was not a revolutionary threat to the Roman Empire, or to the shabby Jewish rule of Israel. Instead, Christ’s kingdom centers on His righteousness, peace, truth, and life eternal given to His elect. And isn’t that Kingdom worth celebrating and supporting?

The reality of this whole separation of church and state—or the separation of the two Kingdoms—all receive recognition and authority given by God. Christ came to establish the foundation of His Kingdom to defend, support, and save His people. In reality, it is not a Kingdom that should have or can be celebrated for over 2,100 years. It’s a celebration we enjoy every day and in every worship—citizens of this great country that is celebrating God’s grace for 250 years! But, more importantly, we celebrate being citizens of the Kingdom of Christ that is our now and for eternity.

SO, let’s all celebrate! Give thanks not only for our country’s Semiquincentennial, but our privilege of being celebrants of our Bimillenary (the 2,000 years of our life in Christ) or our Decamillenary—the myriad of time that is now and forever. Have a great Fourth of July!



SYNOD NEWS —

Harrison Elected to Sixth Term as LCMS President

The Rev. Dr. Matthew C. Harrison, having received more than 50% of the votes cast in the third ballot for the election of the president of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), is the president-elect for the 2026–2029 triennium. It will be his sixth term in office.

The election for the position of Synod president began last fall with an online nominating process, conducted by YesElections, that concluded February 18, or five months prior to the start of the Synod convention, with a report to the secretary of the Synod. The first ballot was presented to electors on June 6 and included five candidates. By the third ballot, presented June 20, three candidates remained. Of the 5,038 votes cast in the third round of voting (representing 92% of the electorate), Harrison received 2,524 votes (50.1%). “Thank you for this amazing opportunity to serve a final term,” Harrison shared in response.



The Rev. Matthew C. Harrison was first elected to the office of LCMS President in 2010.

For more on the election process, the complete slate of candidates, and Harrison’s comments as he looks toward a sixth term as president of the LCMS, please see the full story in *The Reporter*, available at <https://reporter.lcms.org/2026/harrison-elected-to-sixth-term-as-lcms-president/>.

**CHRIST
IS RISEN**
..... INDEED

1 corinthians 15

**Prayers for all who will
take part in the 2026
Synodical Convention in
Phoenix this month!**

LCMS 69th Regular Convention JULY 18-23, 2026

**For complete coverage of the 69th Regular Convention of
the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod as it happens, visit
lcms.org/convention/national**

District Presents 2026 Ralph Weiser Award

The Mid-South District is pleased to announce the 2026 recipient of the Ralph Weiser Excellence in Ministry Award: **Dr. Fred Guengerich** of Redeemer Lutheran Church in Nashville, TN. The award was presented to Dr. Guengerich following worship at Redeemer on Sunday, June 14.

Introduced in 2016, the Ralph Weiser Excellence in Ministry Award recognizes the dedication and ministry—building work of one Mid-South District layperson. The award honors the life and work of the late Ralph Weiser, a long-time friend of the Mid-South District whose example of leadership, service and faith impacted his local Lutheran congregation and community, as well as ministries across the entire District.



Pictured following the award presentation are (L to R) Cheryl Guengerich (Fred's wife); Dr. Fred Guengerich; Rev. Dr. Roger Paavola, Mid-South District President; and Rev. Philip Young, Pastor of Redeemer.

The Mid-South District is grateful for Dr. Guengerich's many ministry contributions, including his service as a member of the District's Board of Directors since 2015 and ten years with the Synod's Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR). An esteemed Professor of Biochemistry at Vanderbilt University, Dr. Guengerich—or simply "Fred" as he's known among his Lutheran faith family—never fails to share his leadership and other talents for the advancement of God's Kingdom, whether in service to the District or his home congregation. *Congratulations and many thanks to Fred!*

REGISTER TODAY for Conferences Across the District

THE HENKEL CONFERENCE August 17-18

*Ascension Lutheran
in Madison, TN*

Ascension Lutheran Church in Madison, TN is pleased to once again host The Henkel Conference—a presentation and discussion event devoted to Christian theology and cultural engagement. The Conference will take place August 17-18 at Ascension's campus (610 Old Hickory Blvd.). With a slight change to prior years, this year's conference will conclude with a panel discussion on free speech. **Registration for this event is \$165 for those who sign up by August 10.** For event details, including the speaker line-up and online registration, [visit the conference page HERE](#).

PROF INSIGHTS August 3-5

*St. Paul Lutheran
in Wartburg, TN*

You are invited to the Concordia Seminary, St. Louis "Prof Insights: Faculty-Led Workshop Series," coming to St. Paul Lutheran Church in Wartburg, Tennessee from August 3-5. Designed for pastors, church workers and lay people, the annual series offers in-depth study on contemporary topics that influence the practice of ministry and worship. The August workshop topic is *Reading and Preaching the Gospel of Mark*. **Registration for this event is \$160 and is due by July 20.** For more on this event and the Concordia Seminary, St. Louis faculty presenter, [visit the workshop page HERE](#).

CTSFW CONTINUING ED August 3-5

*Redeemer Lutheran
in Nashville, TN*

Redeemer Lutheran Church in Nashville, TN is pleased to welcome Dr. David Maxwell for the CTSFW Continuing Education course "The Theology of St. Cyril of Alexandria." Coming up **August 3-5**, this course introduces students to Cyril of Alexandria's theological system as he presents it in his Commentary on John. **Registration for this event is \$175 (1.5 CEU for Pastors & Prof. Church Workers) and \$125 for retired Pastors and laypersons.** For the complete course description and registration, [visit the course page HERE](#).



Grace Celebration Hosts Summer Family Fun Day!

Grace Celebration Lutheran Church in Cordova, TN celebrated SUMMER FAMILY FUN DAY with an outdoor service on Sunday, May 31. The day included music by Zion's Calling and delicious food prepared by The Holy Smokers (a cooking crew of primarily Grace members). The highlight of the day, however, was the baptism of 10 people! The newly baptized included four students from Grace's LifeWise Academy, five men from the Salvation Army, and a worker from the YMCA "Y-Care" that takes place on the campus of Grace Celebration. LifeWise Academy is the weekly biblical life skills program that allows Grace to connect with over 200 students from nearby public schools. The congregation looks forward to the baptism of several more LifeWise students over the summer. What a great day of community and Gospel connection at Grace Celebration!



Is Summer Break Testing Your Parenting Patience?



Summer is great for so many reasons! There is outdoor fun to enjoy, vacations, and for parents, a break from the stress of hectic school schedules and other activities. But the extended time at home with children can create its own kind of stress. A recent blog entry from our friends at Lutheran Family Service takes a closer look at parenting challenges during summer months and offers a fresh perspective. Take a moment to click and read **[“Parenting With Patience During Long Summer Breaks.”](#)**

For more on physical, mental and spiritual wellness, join the Mid-South District's **[Worker Wellness Facebook Group!](#)**



THE MID-SOUTH DISTRICT INVITES YOU TO SAVE THE DATE FOR OKTOBERFEST



**SATURDAY
OCTOBER 24
11 AM - 3 PM**

**Immanuel Lutheran Church
in Memphis** (6325 Raleigh LaGrange Rd.)

FOOD • BEER • MUSIC • MORE

A Celebration of the Mid-South District's 60th Anniversary!



We are happy to announce that **Pastor Timothy Sandeno** has been extended a call to serve the Lord in the LCMS Eurasia Region, and he has accepted! Joining him in this call is his wife, Lisa. Pastor Sandeno will serve as a church planter in Spangdahlem, Germany. Pastor Sandeno's home church is **Praise Lutheran Church in Maryville, TN.**

Before he leaves the United States, Rev. Sandeno and his wife will be available to share with congregations in the district about the work God is doing in the Eurasia Region. Please consider reaching out to him and to your pastors to set up some time to hear about this amazing work. Contact Rev. Sandeno here: timothy.sandeno@lcms.org

Please keep Pastor Sandeno and his family in your prayers as they begin this transition to serving God's people in Germany.



The following link takes you to Pastor Sandeno's online profile page: <https://www.lcms.org/sandeno>. This can be printed out as a reminder of the work he will be doing and of any prayer requests he has.

New LCMS Missionaries from the Mid-South District



The following link takes you to Beatrice's online profile page: <https://www.lcms.org/suggs>. This can be printed out as a reminder of the work she will be doing and of any prayer requests she has.

We are happy to announce that **Beatrice Suggs** has been extended a solemn appointment to serve the Lord in the LCMS Eurasia region, and she accepted! Beatrice will serve as a Business Administrator in Brasov, Romania. Beatrice's home church is **Grace Lutheran Church in Murfreesboro, TN.**

Before she leaves the United States, Beatrice will be available to share with congregations in the district about the work God is doing in the Eurasia region. Please consider reaching out to her and to your pastors to set up some time to hear about this amazing work. Contact Beatrice here: beatrice.suggs@lcms.org.

Please keep Beatrice in your prayers as she begins this transition to serving God's people in Romania.

YOU GET TO TELL THEM.

If you have an interest in serving as an overseas missionary through the LCMS, please contact us at mission.recruitment@lcms.org or visit our webpage at [lcms.org/missionary-service](https://www.lcms.org/missionary-service)

Mid-South & Southern District LCMS Educators

It's Your Time to Recharge!



Join fellow Lutheran educators **October 8–10** in beautiful Shalimar, Florida for an inspiring conference centered on this year's powerful theme: Salt & Light.

- Dynamic keynote speaker: Ted Neitzke
- Practical, engaging breakout sessions
- Encouragement for your ministry and vocation
- Meaningful fellowship with LCMS educators from across the Mid-South & Southern Districts
- Time to refresh, reconnect, and reignite your purpose

Whether you're in the classroom, leading a school, or supporting ministry in other ways, this conference is designed to equip and encourage you to shine brightly where God has placed you.

Register now and make plans to join us!

LOCATION: Good Shepherd Lutheran Church (1 Meigs Dr, Shalimar, FL 32579)

REGISTRATION: \$100 per attendee. **Due on or before August 15, 2026.**

NO REFUNDS after September 5, 2026. No registration discount for attending one day. The travel costs will be the responsibility of the congregations/schools.

HOTEL: Hampton Inn Fort Walton Beach, FL (1112 Santa Rosa Blvd. / Fort Walton Beach, FL)

- The group rate for the hotel per night is \$170.00
- These spacious guestrooms include two queen beds
- Deadline for room reservations is Saturday, September 5, 2026
- All unreserved rooms will be dropped after that date and you will be responsible for the regular cost of the room and any taxes they include.

If you have any questions, please contact April Jones (ajones@mid-southlcms.com) at the Mid-South District Office.

REGISTER ONLINE NOW!

Trauma is complex.

Helping doesn't have to be.

 **SPIRITUAL FIRST AID™**



Christ the King Lutheran Church
5296 Park Avenue, Memphis, TN 38119

SEPT. 18-19
Details below

Learn Spiritual First Aid™ to care for friends and neighbors

If you have a heart to help and care for your friends and neighbors but you don't always know what to say or do, join **Lutheran Church Charities and Christ the King Lutheran Church, Memphis** to discover how to become a spiritual first responder by learning Spiritual First Aid™, a biblically based framework for emotional and crisis care.

2-day training workshop at CTK in Memphis

September 18 6:00-9:00 p.m. (Light dinner beforehand)

September 19 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. (Lunch & refreshments)

*Scan or click the QR
code to sign up. Select
Christ The King LC
Memphis TN.*



Registration fee is \$25. To earn SFA certification, you must attend both sessions of the training.

Please join us on Sunday, September 20 when Lutheran Church Charities President/CEO Rev. Chris Singer will be the guest preacher at Christ the King. Contact Genie Swan at CTK with any questions (gswan@ctkmemphis.com).

You're Invited to Faith's 75th Anniversary Celebration 1951 – 2026



“Celebrating God’s FAITHfulness”

I will sing of the Lord’s great love forever; with my mouth I will make your FAITHfulness known through all generations. Psalm 89:1

Sunday, October 18th

Worship Services: 8am & 10:30am

Banquet to follow 2nd service

Faith Lutheran Church

101 Bragg Circle, Tullahoma, TN 37388

If you can join us please RSVP by September 20th

Email: faithsecretary@lighttube.net

Phone: 931-455-3510

Watch the LSM Concerts Live This July

Join us online through **Live from LSM** and enjoy more than 30 free concerts, recitals, and worship services streamed live from Lutheran Summer Music at St. Olaf College.

Highlights include a special guest performance by Cantus, Bach’s St. Matthew Passion, the Bach Cantata Eucharist, the Festival of Hymns, and joyful performances by the Festival Band, Choir, and Orchestra.

It’s all happening now through July 19!
View the full schedule and watch live at
LSMacademy.org/calendar.



VIII National Hispanic Convention - LCMS

July 28-31, 2026

Concordia University Irvine
1530 Concordia West, Irvine, CA

*Celebrate 100 years of LCMS
Hispanic Ministry in the USA*



*Registration
is open!*

100 AÑOS
celebraZion
MINISTERIO HISPANOS LCMS
SALMO 145:4

 **HISPANIC
MISSIONARY
LEAGUE**
CREATING WORSHIP



www.hispanoslcms.com



BEST PRACTICES for Ministry | Heartland

AUGUST 9 - 11, 2026

Frankenmuth, Michigan

Register Today!

Attendees by June 30

Breakout Leaders by May 31

Exhibitors by May 31



PASTORS

MUSIC LEADERS

WORSHIP LEADERS

TEACHERS

ADMINISTRATION

CHURCH STAFF

VOLUNTEERS

LEADERS



bph@stlorenz.org

WORSHIP

BREAKOUTS

KEYNOTES

FELLOWSHIP



St. Lorenz
LUTHERAN CHURCH & SCHOOL

Prayer Summary, June 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 June.

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. ALBERT EICHELBERGER (Emeritus, Knoxville, TN)
REV. LAURENCE KEIM (SMP, Chapel of the Good Shepherd, Sharps Chapel, TN)
REV. PAUL LEIGEBER (Faith Lutheran Church, Union City, TN & Trinity Lutheran Church, Dyersburg, TN)
REV. GERALD HEMMINGSON (First Lutheran Church, Harrison, AR)
MRS. NANCY CALLIES (wife of Rev. David Callies, Emeritus, Former District President MDS)
MRS. FLORENCE EICHELBERGER (wife of Rev. Albert Eichelberger, Knoxville, TN)
MRS. NORMA MOORE (wife of Rev. Tom Moore, Called to Glory, Cordova, TN)
MS. STEPHANIE ELSEROAD (daughter of Rev. Rich Elseroad (EM) Knoxville, TN)
MR. ROBERT NERGER (Former Mid-South District Board of Directors, Wartburg, TN)
MR. JEREMY HOWE (Huntsville, AL)
MRS. JODICE BELISLE (wife to Rev. Russell Belisle, Cross of Calvary Lutheran Church, Memphis, TN)

Our deepest sympathies to the family and friends of the **REV. THOM LAKSO** (Emeritus) Knoxville, TN who passed away June 7, 2026. Funeral services took place, June 20, 2026.

CALL UPDATE

ORDAINED MINISTERS —

ACCEPTED: Rev. Keith Knupp, Associate Pastor to Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church, Crossville, TN accepted the Call to serve as Senior Pastor to Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church, Crossville, TN. Installation took place June 28.

ORDAINED MINISTERS (cont.)—

PENDING: Pastor-Elect, Michael Saxon, Seminary Graduate Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, MO, received a Call to serve as Associate Pastor-Church Planter to Grace Lutheran Church, Knoxville, TN.

DECLINED:

Rev. Willis McCall, Pastor to Mount Olive Lutheran Church, Classical School & Preschool, Billings, MT, returned the Call to serve as Senior Pastor to Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Chattanooga, TN.

Rev. Matthew Krause, Senior Pastor to Faith Lutheran Church & Preschool, Adel, IA, returned the Call to serve as Senior Pastor to Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church, Crossville, TN.

Rev. Russell Belisle, Pastor to Cross of Calvary, Memphis, TN returned the Call to serve as Pastor to Jehovah Lutheran Church, Pensacola, FL.

COMMISSIONED MINISTERS —

ACCEPTED: Michelle Fischer, Mid-South District Executive Director for Education, Youth & Family accepted the Call to serve as Executive Assistant for Congregational & School Services to the Southern District.

VACANT CONGREGATIONS & MINISTRIES

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Chattanooga, TN — *Senior Pastor*

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



Congregational Mission Commitments

Mission Commitment Receipts 5-31-26 (5 months)

Anticipated Amount (41.67% of budget) \$687,550
Actual Receipts 655,640
Over (under) anticipated amount..... (\$31,910)

Use of Mission Commitment Receipts (5 Months)

Allocated to Synod for World Missions \$186,275
Allocated to Tanzania 10,417
Retained for District Mission/Ministry
Support (70% of receipts) 458,948
Total Receipts \$655,640

Mission Commitment Receipts Prior Year Comparison (5 Months)

Actual Receipts as of 5/31/2026 \$655,640
Actual Receipts as of 5/31/2025 \$657,084
Over (under) prior year receipts (\$1,444)

Share your news with us!

Encourager Topics in 2026

We invite you to share your stories with us! Please email stories by the 20th of the month to Rhonda at webmaster.contact@mid-southlcms.com.

Here's a look at the upcoming topics for 2026:

- August — *Church Planting*
- September — *Stewardship*
- October — *Lutheran Heritage*

Lutheran Witness Supplement

The monthly deadline is the 7th. Please email your original high resolution digital photos (.pdf or .jpg files only) and a short paragraph to *The Lutheran Witness* Supplement editor, Judy Otto at lw.contact@mid-southlcms.com or by calling 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

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Executive Director for Education, Youth & Family

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