



MID-SOUTH LUTHERAN



ASH WEDNESDAY

‘Return to the Lord’

LCMS/Erik M. Lunsford

On a summer vicarage during seminary, I went to a small town on the border of Manitoba (Canada) and North Dakota to start a mission church. Like our American farm towns, most of the farms in the area were no longer 180 acres. They covered thousands of acres with huge machinery and far fewer families.

What happened? Farmsteads just simply closed. Ghost towns spread across the landscape. One could travel for hours without coming across a populated town. Post offices had cobwebs across the mail slots. Lawns were overrun with briars. Weeds grew up through the cracks in the streets. Windows were broken in almost every building. The



Rev. Dr. Roger Paavola
District President

electricity was gone so the entire town was dark. The smell of stinking rot permeated the air. Hundreds of homes and businesses were there for the taking, but no one was there.

The prophet Joel saw things like that in Jerusalem. The temple of Jerusalem had fallen into disuse. It looked and smelled like no one was there. Centuries of misuse, abuse or disuse made that once-magnificent temple look more like a ghost town than God’s temple.

But there was a turn-around: the book of Chronicles describes how God’s people returned to the temple and started cleaning and refurbishing it. The people gave offerings to restore the temple and return it back to almost normal. But Joel noted that while the temple was being used, the refurbishing wasn’t complete. Everything looked spic and span, but there was still a problem: the people.

Isn’t this the same on another Ash

Wednesday some 3,000 years later? God has seen many of His churches turn into ghost towns. To get people inside, generic churches have revamped the worship by using entertaining sounds, flashy lights and messages of prosperity. Sure, people are coming to a church building, but if they only hear about a God of prosperity, are they really being fed by God’s Word?

You see, God didn’t send Jesus to this world to excite or entertain us. He doesn’t want us to stop talking about sin just because it might make some people feel bad. God doesn’t just want us to say all the right words, and He isn’t interested in giving us an assignment of duties to work on when we get home or something to give up for the 40 days of Lent. God is interested in our eternal salvation!

Giving something up or coming to worship might be good things. But God looks for things to change on the inside — for each and every one of us. Those abandoned buildings, the town no one cared about, could be our church. Take an honest look. What do we see? Is there good or evil? Is there grass growing up on the paths to our churches because of disuse?

Think about it this way: Are the people we know more interested in the things of God or the things of this world? Is God always in first place in one’s heart, or has He slipped through the cracks behind our priorities of career, family or entertainment?

Maybe it’s the time we spend with friends, on vacation, watching TV or surfing the web. We’re used to schedul-

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LENT

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1)

ing our “ME time” and make sure we keep those appointments. But what’s happened to sincere worship time? What about personal devotions? Is that temple of the Lord — our own spiritual building — well kept, strong and growing? Or do we see signs of overgrown neglect, serious cracks of disrepair and an abandoned temple of God’s Spirit where cobwebs obstruct our view of eternal life?

When the people in Joel’s time locked the doors of their hearts in inattentiveness of spiritual life, they may have expected their faith to remain intact. But honestly, looking a little deeper, we see the signs of some serious deterioration. Joel has something to say to us who wish to remain faithful followers of God. Lent focuses on a word of instruction, a word that sums up the meaning of Lent: “Return.” It means to come back to where God pleads with us and says, “Return to Me!”

“Yet even now,” declares the LORD, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.” Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. **JOEL 2:12-13**

Would anyone today ever tear their clothing? In Joel’s day, ripping one’s clothing was a sign of deep sadness. But the people played games with God. Confronted with neglect and their sin, they tore their clothing to show how sad they were. They placed ashes on their foreheads to signal their shame — doing everything to make themselves look sad. But they’d go back home to the same old sin. God’s prophet says, “That ripping of your garments looks OK, but rip open your heart where the real depravity, the real object of sinfulness lies.”

The underlying problem was never touched. Those outward signs of repentance were what they did. On Ash Wednesday, we put ashes on our foreheads, we kneel before God, confess



our sins, sing repentant songs, and offer penitential prayers. Good! But if we’re doing nothing more than a crying game, telling God how sorry we are for our sins and then we return to our old lifestyle, we’re just playing a game.

“Return to Me with all your heart,” says the Lord. It’s a commitment. Partial or conditional commitment is no commitment at all. “Return to Me with all your heart,” says the Lord.

The sad truth is that excuses don’t fly with God. When God calls people to repentance, He means everyone. Pastors and church workers? God includes them especially to repentance — the condition of the heart toward God, a total commitment to God, unconditionally.

“Return to Me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning, says the Lord God.” In Luther’s 95 Theses, the first reads:

When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, “Repent,” He willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”

It doesn’t mean to just be sorry for our sin. Repentance means to turn around — to turn from sin and destruction and return to God. Luther said repentance is every day in our Christian life.

Ash Wednesday stresses the deep need for repentance. Yes, I am a sinner. The things I say, the things I do, the thing I am would never allow me to stand in the presence of a perfect and glorious Lord God. But hidden in these words today, God tells me that the wrong things I’ve said and done, the things I’ve left undone, and the sin of my human nature from the time of my conception are gone. God will punish no more.

Because He relents, His judgment against my sin is gone. But why? Beginning with this chief of sinners — Roger Paavola — why would God declare this worthless sinner innocent and forgiven?

This is what Lent is all about. We take our steps on a journey toward the cross of Calvary. We learn how God’s grace declares us innocent. You see, God placed the judgment of my sin and the sins of all the world on Jesus and had Him suffer and die in my place and yours.

In these six weeks we will watch and hear how God in a joyous exchange takes our guilt and shame and places it on the sacred shoulders of His innocent and righteous Son, Jesus Christ. We’ll learn how the mystery of the deep, deep love of Christ moved Him to willingly journey to the cross and give every bit of Himself so you and I could live forever in glory.

Can we make this deliverance from our sin more real? Can we make it something worth celebrating every day? Sure, we can give up something for Lent, but are we willing to give up something for the rest of our life? God doesn’t command us to give up anything during Lent — eating, drinking, entertaining, habits, or anything. All God wants is for us to give up the path of sin that leads to destruction.

“You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the LORD your God, who has dealt wondrously with you. And my people shall never again be put to shame. You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I am the LORD your God and there is none else.” **JOEL 2:26-27**

As we begin our Lenten journey, we’ll hear the words of Christ from the cross, fulfilling God’s promise that brings you and me into a complete restoration to God. It’s a time of repentance — not just an outward sign, but an inward transformation given to us by God’s own Spirit.

All of this is because of the deep love, grace and mercy God wishes for you through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.



At this year's Lutheran World Relief CareVan ingathering, the Mid-South District collected items at six sites: Grace Lutheran, Knoxville; Cross of Christ, Chattanooga; Our Savior, Nashville; Immanuel, Memphis; First, Fort Smith, Ark.; and Zion of Avilla, Alexander, Ark.

Thirty-three congregations participated, collecting over \$4,675 to help defray shipping costs.

Items collected included 1,076 quilts, 1,493 personal care kits (one congrega-

tion donated 225!), 120 fabric kits, 701 school kits and 227 baby care kits.

The CareVan trailers were loaded with 439 boxes (weighing about 8,730 pounds) of offerings from district congregations for Lutheran World Relief to distribute to those in need around the world.

See complete details of the 2024 CareVan activity at mid-southlcms.org. Go to "Resources" and select "Care Van 2024" from the drop-down menu.



Equipping families

Family Discipleship Facilitator Training is available through the Concordia Center for the Family (CCF), an LCMS Recognized Service Organization that is focused on inspiring and equipping Christian leaders to facilitate thriving home-centered family discipleship, enabling Christ's gifts to create faith in and through families with church support.

CCF is training pastors and other church workers, and lay leaders to ignite new zeal for family discipleship. Training sessions will be held April 22-26 at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, and May 12-26 at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Ind.

Learn more at concordiafamily.org.

Congregation mission commitment receipts



as of Nov. 30, 2024 (11 months)

Anticipated amount (92% of budget)	\$1,502,916
Actual receipts	\$1,484,289
Over (under) anticipated amount	(\$18,627)

Use of mission commitment receipts

Allocated to Synod for world missions	\$422,370
Allocated to Tanzania	\$22,917
Retained for district ministry/mission support (70% of receipts)	\$1,039,002
Total receipts	\$1,484,289

Mission commitment receipts comparison

Actual receipts as of Nov. 30, 2024	\$1,484,289
Actual receipts as of Nov. 30, 2023	\$1,430,538
Over (under) prior year receipts	\$53,751

GROW Grants

The GROW Grants program makes financial support available to congregations and schools that create innovative ministry programs or initiatives to reach new hearts with the Gospel.

New ethnic ministries, outreach to college students, a community food pantry or clothing closet, help for the homeless,

or any ongoing program that provides opportunities for Gospel-sharing with the community at large could be a grant candidate.

A GROW grant is a one-time financial outlay of up to \$15,000 for a ministry or program that will be on-going and self-sustaining after its initial launch.

To learn more and get an application, visit mid-southlcms.org (Go to "Resources" and select "Grow Grants" from the drop-down menu); or contact Angela Fowler at afowler@mid-southlcms.com with questions.

Share your news with us!

Digital files are preferred. Email submissions to LW@mid-southlcms.com or send by postal mail to: Judy Otto; 150 N. Maury St.; Holly Springs, MS 38635
The deadline for the April issue is Feb. 15.



Sent forth to reach the lost

Why are we tempted to impress and curry favor with these people:

- CINOs (Christians in name only);
- Those who follow the traditions of men;
- Laodiceans (who value comfort over witnessing);
- Wolves in sheep's clothing;
- Marthas (who are concerned only with material things); and
- Pagans, who worship other gods?

Why do you care what they think of you? Of course you will receive flak and spiritual attacks. They attacked Christ and His disciples, so why should they not attack us as well? But don't worry — God is with us, and He will never leave us nor forsake us. They are defeated and we are victorious. We are on the winning side.

We are not here by chance, but for such a time as this (Esther 4:13-14). We are called, equipped and sent forth into battle — spiritual battle — to reach the lost (who are all around us) with His truth, love and compassion.

We need to start the day on our knees before God, praying and feasting on His



Word. Then we are to put on our spiritual armor (Ephesians 6) and go forth to reach those He brings across our path. When we surrender to Christ and seek His guidance, we will see the Holy Spirit work through us, bearing much spiritual fruit and even miracles.

We will only experience His Joy — the joy of the Lord — when we discern His

will for our lives and carry it out with gladness in our hearts. So we need to stand strong, be bold and be courageous. We are to be the people He has called us to be and speak His Word and His truth with love and compassion.

He brings people into our lives for a reason and a season. We are to discern the reason (from the still, small voice of the Holy Spirit), but typically we will not know the length of the season, for things are happening fast in the world and we are not guaranteed tomorrow.

Time is short, and He is leading us on a great spiritual adventure. It is truly exciting; the most important thing we have ever done in our lives and we will never be the same.

It is time for us to buckle up, go forth and enjoy the ride. And then He will bring us home. God loves us more than we can imagine, and He can't wait to welcome us home through the gates of heaven.

So let us go out with "Godfidence," walking and speaking as if God sent us, because He has!

To God be the glory.

**Board of Evangelism
First Lutheran Church, Little Rock**



CHRIST'S LIGHT in the midst of trials

"I know that God works His greatest good when everything seems to be falling around us," said Rev. Kevin Loughran, pastor of Grace Lutheran Church, St. Petersburg, Fla. Grace's church and school building suffered significant damage when Hurricane Milton blew through the area on Oct. 9. The very next morning, more than 40 volunteers from the church, school, community and even farther afield arrived to help.

The Winter 2025 issue of *Lutherans Engage the World* highlights a few of the ways that God comes to His people even at their lowest point, whether that's after a natural disaster, while serving time in prison, or while seeking asylum in Germany. So far, hundreds of Persian migrants who are hoping to receive

asylum in Germany have found forgiveness and salvation in the Gospel of Jesus Christ thanks to the dedicated efforts of a handful of German pastors and LCMS missionaries. And these migrants can't help but tell their friends.

The issue also includes a story about a new Lutheran school in Branson, Mo.; how LCMS Ministry to the Armed Forces supports both military chaplains and military personnel in living out their faith; and thoughts from international church leaders who recently attended a gathering hosted by LCMS Church Relations.

The Winter 2025 issue began arriving in mailboxes in late December. Read it online at engage.lcms.org, or sign up for a free subscription at engage.lcms.org/subscribe.

Redeemer receives new baptismal font

By Chris Goldbeck

A new, custom-designed font that was recently installed at Redeemer, Nashville, was supplied jointly by New Holland Church Furniture of New Holland, Pa., and Henninger's of Brook Park, Ohio. New Holland crafted the base out of rift-sawn red oak wood, and Henninger's sourced the carving of the marble top from artisans in Carrara, Italy.

A traditional eight-sided font design was chosen because of the symbolism associated with the eight sides. Christ was raised on the eighth day of the week, and likewise believers received new life through Baptism. Also, in the Old Testament, infant boys were circumcised when they were 8 days old. With circumcision being the shadow of the substance that is Baptism, an eight-sided font reminds us of that connection. Lastly, the eight-sided font reminds us of the eight souls that were saved in the flood. The flood prayer is traditionally said during a Baptism, so this symbolism provides additional reinforcement.

The font was placed at the entrance to the nave in part to provide ornamentation where there had previously been none, but also to show that we are a congregation that places an emphasis



Members of Redeemer's Font Committee are, from left, Chris Goldbeck, Matthew Young, Rev. Philip Young, Carol Childress and Matthew Carver. Missing from the photo are Brenda Douglass and Stephen Hallock.

on the Sacraments. The placement of the font also is in keeping with the tradition that Baptism is the entrance into Christian life in the church.

The eight-sided font presented us with the opportunity (and challenge) of including carved imagery on the font. It was decided that four alternating panels would contain Luther's Rose. The

remaining four panels would contain Noah's Ark, the *Agnus Dei*, a shell (a traditional symbol of Baptism), and a descending dove which represents the Holy Spirit who is delivered in Baptism. Edward Riojas was commissioned to provide graphic consistency among the carvings. Riojas' designs are also featured in Redeemer's new paraments.

Rev. Mark Goble was installed as senior pastor of Christ the King (CTK), Memphis, on Dec. 8. Pictured are, from left, Revs. Clayton Sellers, associate pastor, Faith, Collierville, Tenn.; Matthew Lynch, associate pastor, CTK; Mark Goble; and Charles Neugebauer, CTK pastor emeritus. Rev. Goble had served CTK as associate pastor for 27 years and accepted the call as senior pastor following Pastor Neugebauer's retirement.

May God bless Pastor Goble as he continues to serve with the family of Christ the King!



OFFICIAL NOTICE
The 22nd Regular Convention
Mid-South District of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod
Memphis, Tennessee

Dates: Thursday, June 12 (mid-afternoon) to Saturday, June 14, 2025 (mid-afternoon)

Location: The Hilton Hotel
939 Ridgeland Blvd., Memphis, TN 38120; Phone: 901-684-6664

Theme: "Christ: The Church's One Foundation" - 1 Corinthians 3:10-11

Opening Service with Holy Communion:
Thursday, June 12, 2025, at 7:30 p.m.
Christ the King Lutheran Church
5296 Park Avenue, Memphis, TN 38119
Preacher: *Synodical Representative*

NOTICE TO ALL CONGREGATIONS

Please remember the following deadlines to submit nomination ballots and convention resolutions:

NOMINATION BALLOTS FOR DISTRICT PRESIDENT
NOMINATION BALLOTS FOR DISTRICT REGIONAL VICE PRESIDENTS
NOMINATION BALLOTS FOR BOARD OF DIRECTORS (Commissioned and Lay)

Deadline: **February 11, 2025**

To be sent to the Mid-South District Secretary

Rev. Larry Peters
Mid-South District – LCMS
1675 Wynne Road, Cordova, TN 38016

NOMINATION BALLOTS FOR DISTRICT SECRETARY
NOMINATION BALLOTS FOR DISTRICT NOMINATIONS COMMITTEE

Deadline: **February 11, 2025**

To be sent to the District Nominations Committee c/o Mid-South District President

Rev. Dr. Roger Paavola
Mid-South District – LCMS
1675 Wynne Road, Cordova, TN 38016

REPORTS, MEMORIALS AND OVERTURES TO BE PRESENTED TO THE DISTRICT CONVENTION

Deadline: **March 15, 2025**

To be sent to the Mid-South District President

Rev. Dr. Roger Paavola
Mid-South District – LCMS
1675 Wynne Road, Cordova, TN 38016

NOMINATION BALLOTS FOR CIRCUIT VISITORS

Deadline: **One day before the Circuit Forum**

To be sent to Each Congregation's Respective Circuit Visitor

(Each Circuit Forum will be held at the District Convention or as scheduled by the individual Circuit per Synod Bylaw 5.2.2 [a])

MARKS OF THE TRUE CHRISTIAN

Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. **ROMANS 12:9-13**

During February there's a disproportionate amount of time (and money!) spent on the topic of love. These few verses from St. Paul's letter to the Romans provide a succinct description of what Christian love looks like. The verbs alone provide our marching orders.

This month, take some time to really dig into those verbs and what they mean. For me, "be fervent" and "rejoice in hope" need some attention! What about you?

As Lutheran Women in Mission, we take these marching orders seriously as we "Serve the Lord with Gladness." So, let's get out there and continue to share the Good News with Christian love.

Candy Habich, Chairman

LWML Mid-South District Media and Marketing Committee



Ideas for Valentine's Day

Show some love!

- ▶ **Send valentines to LWML district Mission Grant recipients.** Just think what a wonderful surprise it would be for grant recipients to receive a valentine from your zone or group! Check out this tool kit for how to implement: Visit lwml.org and type "Mission Service to Mission Grant Recipients" in the search bar at the top right of the page.
- ▶ **Have a Valentine's Day Bible study.** You can invite all the ladies in your congregation for study and some heart-themed snacks. LWML has a wonderful Bible study at lwml.org. Type "God's Valentine to Us," in the search bar at the top right of the page.

From left, Rev. Dr. Thomas Egger, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis (CSL) president, and Rev. Dr. Ronald Mudge, CSL provost, receive a check for \$7,000 for the LWML district Mission Grant "Expanding Gospel Proclamation Worldwide – Supporting International Students." Many CSL international students are from developing nations and thus have limited resources. The funds will help these students pursue theological degrees and return to their home countries to serve as pastors and professors.

Lutheran Women in Mission

41ST BIENNIAL CONVENTION

Omaha, Neb. | June 26-29



But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.

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TRINITY HOPE

Amid strife, ministry carries on in Haiti

“As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.”

MATTHEW 25:40

Following the tenets of Christ, Trinity HOPE has been providing a noon meal to thousands of children attending Christian schools in Haiti for the past 25 years. Through all this time, we have watched God work in the lives of those with whom we come in contact. In a country rife with poverty and malnutrition, and where the worship of voodoo is loud, these school lunches demonstrate God’s mercy and open the door for the Gospel message to be heard and retained.

Conditions in Haiti have been hard for many generations and, most recently, have been getting more difficult as the ongoing political climate has deteriorated and made way for active and dangerous gangs. Yet God still paves a path that allows us to serve over 1.1 million meals each month. We were recently reminded of why this work is so important.

We received a message from one of our feeding program directors in the Jeremie district. It had been raining for two days, and the torrential rains caused severe flooding and mudslides. The images of the water coming into the homes and people getting caught up in the currents were reminiscent of what we saw in Tennessee and North Carolina following Hurricane Helene in September. However, in Haiti there are no emergency management systems ready to deploy and their homes are not constructed to withstand these kinds of issues. We received the terrible news that a 10-year-old boy at a school with a Trinity HOPE feeding program had passed away in the mudslides.

As the images and videos came in, we continued to witness the devastation that took place in this rural community. Other children had died, and the grief and loss were evident on the faces of those in the images. As we watched and prayed and felt the pain of our brothers and sisters in Haiti, we were reminded of one truth.

At least one of those precious children attended a school where he learned about the gift of eternal life through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. This young man, who had endured so much in his brief life, is now sitting beside his



A Haitian man tries to navigate flooded property.

Savior because he knew Him well. His funeral was held in a church, which allowed those who loved him to hear about Christ as well.

By the grace of God, Trinity HOPE is now serving over 65,000 children each day throughout Haiti. No matter the challenges our Haitian friends are facing — gangs, natural disasters, corrupt governments — we are there doing the work until God tells us to stop.

Even as seven of our 36 feeding program directors have been displaced from their homes, our staff remains dedicated to visiting schools every day to share the love of Christ through

Scripture and devotions.

We may not be able to protect them from their daily strife, but we can share with them a God who loves them. To learn more about the Trinity HOPE Haitian feeding program, visit trinityhope.org.



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