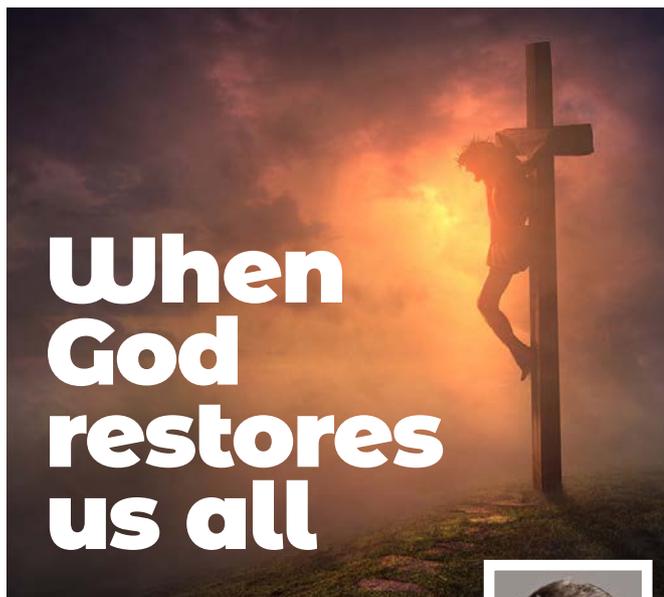




MID-SOUTH LUTHERAN



When God restores us all

This month on Ash Wednesday, we begin the 40-day Lenten journey toward Easter. This reminds us of the prophet Joel, who sent a message to a wealthy nation whose people believed they didn't need anything more from God. Their economy was the strongest in the world. They lived in the lap of luxury. Their agricultural, industrial and international commerce were the greatest they had ever experienced.

As a result of their great economic success, however, the people became weak in their relationship with God. Morals deteriorated. The sacred teachings of God were scoffed at. Other prophets identified them as a nation grown weak in their relationship with God, complacent and self-centered. They took God for granted and worshiped idols.

They had a land filled with plenty, everyone was well off and their economy was booming. Why would they *need* a god?

This nation's worship attendance had dropped off like a rock. On a few rare occasions, people would obligingly offer token gifts of worship on high holidays. It was a socially acceptable thing to do. They went through their religious motions. Why



Rev. Dr. Roger Paavola
District President

did they need God? Some people began creating other festivals, worshiping their human achievements and putting Godly worship in second place, at best.

A scant few of the religious leaders warned the nation that their lavish lifestyle, their lack of morality, and the disintegration of the family as a basic unit of the nation's social structure needed to come to an end. People didn't want to hear such talk. So worship attendance fell even more.

This nation, my dear fellow Christians, is not a snapshot of the United States over the past decades. Nor is it England of the 19th century, or Rome in the first and second centuries. It's the history of Judea, around 835 B.C. The voice no one wanted to hear was God's prophet Joel. It's a mirrored image of what has happened in many powerful nations.

Joel spoke a message of God's judgment against a wayward and complacent people. But he also offered a message of hope after the mighty nation was struck down. Like a devastating cloud of terrorists filling the skies, locusts swept across the land of prosperity and wiped out the very foundation of their wellbeing. The devastation smashed every portion of the economy, bringing the nation to its knees.

I wonder how the people felt. Were they like us, some of whom work harder to try to make it through the mess? Were there others who panicked and said we have to do something? Or were there some who just gave up and threw in the towel? What the locusts left behind was then devastated by other plagues that afflicted the Judeans.

As far as Scripture is concerned, we can easily trace this kind of pattern: prosperity and wellbeing, deterioration of the society, destruction and restoration, time after time. When we look through the lens of history, we find a divine purpose in the hard times because God is trying to get the people's attention. The prophet Joel foretells the coming destruction in this way:

The land is like the garden of Eden before them, but behind them a desolate wilderness, and nothing escapes them ... For the day of the LORD is great and very awesome; who can endure it?" **JOEL 2:3, 11**

Even today, we wonder why bad things happen. Does our personal suffering come from bad choices or does it just happen because we're in the wrong place at the wrong time? The people of Judah didn't make the connection that their lifestyle and

See **LENT**, Page 2

LENT

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1)

relationship to God was the seminal foundation of everything they saw when things started to fall apart.

We wonder: “Is God so concerned about our dedication to Him? Does He have to use such things to get our attention?” God’s first option is love, grace and mercy. If that doesn’t do the job, what’s next? For example, after the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, church attendance in the United States returned to numbers similar to the 1940s and 50s. But within six months, church attendance dropped to the level of the 1990s. It continues to drop even further today.

Does Congress have the answer to all our problems? Or is there a deeper issue they can’t solve? Joel brings a message of hope to a people facing similar questions. Yet hope is a difficult message to hear for people in the midst of suffering and pain. We want to hear and feel relief. The Lord God replies:

“Behold, I am sending to you grain, wine, and oil, and you will be satisfied. **JOEL 2:19**

For the nation of Judah, that was only a promise of a return to economic and moral strength. The agony of their dark years would be restored. But people who can’t get their eyes off economics or put their trust in an aimlessly hopeless government miss the point. This isn’t about temporal needs or abundance. It’s all about our relationship with God.

We’re left to wonder if there are things that we’d like to see restored today. Are there friends or neighbors we’ve heard say they’d like to return to the days of prosperity, but are unwilling to change their lifestyle? Are there some today who’ve thrown their hands up in the air because none of the suggestions offered by a stockbroker, a banker or the government seem to solve their problems?

We can read these verses from Joel that expound on the promise of hope, but does it sink in? Why? We’re ready for restoration. We can’t receive God’s abundant mercy if we refuse to let go of

the old baggage of the way we’ve done things before. We can’t be filled with gracious, divine mercy if we hold on to the baggage of resentment, unforgiveness, or the pride of our past accomplishments.

Restoration doesn’t come automatically. Don’t miss the point of Joel’s prophecy. Look at what needs to happen before things can change for the better. Listen to the Word of the Lord:

“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; and He relents over disaster. Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, **JOEL 2:12–14**

At least back in Joel’s time, people were accustomed to wearing sackcloth and ashes, an outward sign. But Joel felt what was needed was hearts to be ripped open — real repentance, a real effort to avoid doing the same old sin over and over again. God doesn’t accept tokenism. He wants a heart of repentance.

The sad part of Joel’s message is that we can’t do this on our own. Poison cannot unpoison itself. Sinners cannot make themselves clean on their own. But that’s what brings us to a message of hope and a message of repentance in the midst of this new Lenten season.

Joel further says (2:32):

And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.

St. Paul writes:

If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. **2 COR. 5:13**

A nation turning its back on God is a deliberate and collective effort of the will of the people. It’s not just an emotional response. God’s promise is here — if you turn, if you repent, God has already made His provision to restore. But He also doesn’t want us to limit our

expectations or misunderstand what it means to be restored in the Lord.

That new wine and grains Joel speaks about is not just for our tables. It’s a prophecy of the fulfilling of God’s promise to restore His people. It’s not just the new wine at the wedding of Cana or the multiplying of the bread for the multitudes. It’s a prophecy of how Christ brings us a new covenant of grace. It’s about Christ suffering in our humanity to become our Savior — the Bread of Life who comes down from heaven to restore us to God. It’s about the new wine Christ offered on the night He was betrayed to give us the blessed Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. Christ broke bread and gave the new wine to give countless generations of His people the precious gift of His true body and true blood, in order to join us in the beautiful mystery in which heaven comes down repay us in God’s abundant mercy for the years the locusts have eaten away.

“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. And my people shall never again be put to shame. **JOEL 2:26–27**

“You will have plenty to eat, until you are full, and you will praise the name of the Lord, your God, who has worked the wonder for you and never again will My people be shamed, then you will know that I am the Lord your God and there is no other.”

In our Lenten journey to the cross of Christ over the next seven weeks, we will hear from God’s Word of all things that culminate in the words of Christ from the cross, fulfilling God’s promise that brings us into a complete restoration to God. It starts with a night 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 tender mercy God wishes for you, through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

District gathers donations for LWF

The Mid-South District recently had six drop sites to collect donations for the annual Lutheran World Relief (LWF) CareVAN ingathering. Twenty-seven congregations participated.

The drop sites were Zion of Avilla, Alexander, Ark.; First, Fort Smith, Ark.; Cross of Christ, Chattanooga; Grace, Knoxville; Our Savior, Nashville; and Immanuel, Memphis.

Along with the \$5,488 that was donated to help with shipping costs, items collected included 996 handmade quilts, 1,425 personal care kits, 101 fabric kits, 535 school kits and 75 baby care kits.

The trailers were loaded with 387 boxes totaling 7,593 pounds.

Thank you Mid-South District! Lutheran World Relief will distribute these quilts and kits to those in need, domestically and internationally.

— Submitted by Diane Reimold

Julie Tyler, former Mid-South District CareVAN coordinator, organizes donations for Lutheran World Relief.



A joyful noise in Ghana

Singers at St. Martin's Lutheran Church in Cape Coast, Ghana, are inspired to raise a joyful noise, delighted by the new choir robes delivered to the congregation by their pastor, Rev. John Lanbon (pictured in center). The robes were donated by Salem Lutheran Church, Florissant, Mo.

"I believe this gift will motivate the members to learn more hymns, and also attract other music lovers to join the church," Lanbon said.

The Mid-South District has previously provided support to St. Martin's to assist with its building construction of the church.



Congregation mission commitment receipts

as of
Nov. 30, 2025
(10 months)

| | |
|------------------------------------|-------------|
| Anticipated amount (92% of budget) | \$1,492,971 |
| Actual receipts | \$1,443,247 |
| Over (under) anticipated amount | (\$49,724) |

Use of mission commitment receipts

| | |
|--|--------------------|
| Allocated to Synod for world missions | \$410,058 |
| Allocated to Tanzania | \$22,917 |
| Retained for district ministry/mission support (70% of receipts) | \$1,010,273 |
| Total receipts | \$1,443,247 |

Mission commitment receipts comparison

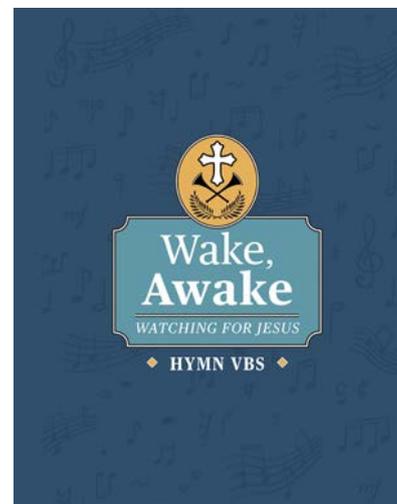
| | |
|-------------------------------------|-------------|
| Actual receipts as of Nov. 30, 2025 | \$1,443,247 |
| Actual receipts as of Oct. 31, 2024 | \$1,484,289 |
| Over (under) prior year receipts | (\$41,042) |

Congratulations!



All Saints Classical Lutheran School, Jonesboro, Ark., was recently recognized for achieving National Lutheran School Accreditation (NLSA). Michelle Fischer, Mid-South District executive for Education, Youth and Family, presented the NLSA certificate following worship at All Saints Lutheran Church on Nov. 2. Michelle is pictured with Rev. Jerome Leckband (center), All Saints headmaster and associate pastor, and Rev. Andrew Lehman, teacher and associate pastor. Established in 2021, All Saints Lutheran School is now accredited through both NLSA and the Consortium for Classical Lutheran Education (CCLE)

Students from **Holy Trinity Lutheran School, Bowling Green, Ky.**, are pictured proudly sharing the news of the school's NLSA status on Nov. 17. Michelle visited the school to present the certificate during morning assembly. Congratulations to Bill Hiskey, school director, and the entire faculty and staff.



A distinctly Lutheran VBS, from CPH

Are you looking for a vacation Bible school experience that emphasizes hymns, liturgy and catechesis? Concordia Publishing House (CPH) is excited to unveil its new Hymn VBS, made with this desire in mind: *Wake, Awake*.

This new VBS program is based on the hymn "Wake, Awake for Night Is Flying" (*LSB* 516). Across five lessons, children will learn how Christ, our Savior, who once came to this world to save us, will come again and take all believers to live with Him forever in the new creation.

Wake, Awake retains the VBS activities children love — such as snacks, games and crafts — but with a distinctly Lutheran approach. Through each day's worship and lessons, children will learn more about God's Word, Luther's Small Catechism, Law and Gospel themes, and more.

Purchase of this VBS guide includes digital resources, including a downloadable version of the hymn VBS guide, plus a music recording of "Wake, Awake, for Night Is Flying" and other helpful resources through the online digital content center.

Learn more and order your materials at cph.org/wake-awake-watching-for-jesus-hymn-vbs.



Blessings at CTK, Memphis

ABOVE: For their annual Veterans Day observance, members of Christ the King (CTK), Memphis, enjoy a choral patriotic medley as members of each branch of the armed forces stand to be recognized. Each veteran wears a red, white and blue ribbon in order to be easily recognized and thanked for his or her service.

CTK's recognition of veterans took on an added dimension in 2025 with a display in the rotunda of memorabilia and uniforms from four branches of the military, along with details of the members' military careers. Many memories were shared at the display.

CTK Lutheran School students also enjoyed the display, which remained in place for the school's Veterans Day observance, including a chapel service and a breakfast honoring the veterans. Children in kindergarten through grade 4 are pictured singing their salute to those honored during chapel on Nov. 11.

RIGHT: Steven Andrews (center) was installed as vicar at CTK on Nov. 2. Vicar Andrews is enrolled in the Specific Ministry Pastor program of Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Ind. He is pictured with Rev. Matthew Lynch (left), associate pastor, and Rev. Mark Goble, senior pastor.



Rev. Pete Duncanson was ordained and installed as associate pastor of Immanuel, Memphis, on Dec. 7.

Pastor Duncanson recently completed studies in the Specific Ministry Pastor program of Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Ind. Pictured are, from left (front row) Revs. Jon Petering, Immanuel senior pastor; Dr. Roger Paavola, district president; Pete Duncanson; Dr. Russell Hildebrandt, emeritus; (back row) Jerry Stobaugh, Holy Spirit, Oakland.; Dr. Terry Tieman, Grace Celebration, Cordova; Jim Belles, Grace Celebration, Cordova; Clarence Martin, emeritus; Clayton Sellers, Faith, Collierville; and Jake Bennett, Peace, Oxford, Miss.





Happy Ordination ANNIVERSARY

We share the Mid-South District pastors who will celebrate milestone ordination anniversaries in 2026. We rejoice and give thanks to God with these gifts to His church.

70 Years

Rev. Hubert Bernthal
Emeritus, Bella Vista, Ark.

60 Years

Rev. Luther Hasz
Emeritus, Jackson, Tenn.

50 Years

Rev. Roger Sterle
Living Savior, Springdale, Ark.

45 Years

Rev. David Anderson
Emeritus, Newport, Tenn.

Rev. Edward Fehskens
Emeritus, Bristol, Tenn.

Rev. Daniel McDougall
Emeritus, Benton, Ark.

Rev. Ronnie Oldenettel
Emeritus, Bella Vista, Ark.

Rev. Lynn Spencer
Emeritus, Bentonville, Ark.

Rev. James Watson
Emeritus, Ooltewah, Tenn.

Rev. Carl Wenck
Emeritus, Murfreesboro, Tenn.

40 Years

Rev. Paul Becker
Emeritus, Kingsport, Tenn.

Rev. Brian Bibler
Emeritus, Bella Vista, Ark.

Rev. Wayne Krohe
Emeritus, Lewisburg, Tenn.

Rev. Gerald Meyer
Emeritus, Crossville, Tenn.

Rev. Thomas Sayre
Emeritus, St. John's, Fla.

35 Years

Rev. David Gadbow
Emeritus, Mountain Home, Ark.

Rev. Donald White
Emeritus, Lakeview, Ark.

30 Years

Rev. Mark Hass
Candidate, Sallisaw, Okla.

Rev. Lane Reuter
Our Savior, Nashville, Tenn.

25 Years

Rev. Kevin Conger
Hope, Jacksonville, Ark.

Rev. Alebachew Teshome,
Faith, Thompson's Station, Tenn.

20 Years

Rev. Curtis Hoover
Faith, Thompson's Station, Tenn.

Rev. Michael Meyer
Holy Trinity, Rogers, Ark.

Rev. Jonathan Petering
Immanuel, Memphis, Tenn.

Rev. Derek Roberts
Praise, Maryville, Tenn.

15 Years

Rev. Thomas Bartzsch
River Valley Grace, Lamar, Ark.

Rev. Cullen Duke
Emeritus, Kingsport, Tenn.

Rev. Seth Korte
St. Paul, Sevierville, Tenn.

Rev. Joshua Leigeber
All Saints, Jonesboro, Ark.

Rev. William Ondracka
Christus Victor, Knoxville, Tenn.

Rev. Sean Smith
Grace, Clarksville, Tenn.

Rev. Daniel Suelzle
All Saints, Jonesboro, Ark.

10 Years

Rev. Gregory Bauch
Ascension, Madison, Tenn.

Rev. Kirk Neugebauer
Redeemer, Paragould, Ark.

Rev. Joshua Schooping
St. John's, Russellville, Ark.

5 Years

Rev. Anthony Johnson
First, Hot Springs, Ark.

Rev. Trae Fistler
Faith, Hopkinsville, Ky.

Support for foster children

“God is always working!” said Sandie Harjala, LWML Mid-South District president, after witnessing His hand helping the Compassion Closet, a ministry that supports foster children and teens rescued from trafficking.

Harjala encountered a long-time volunteer, foster and adoptive parent whose SUV was packed to its roof with boxes, and learned they were Christmas gifts for the foster kids.

“The fostering parents had registered, so it was known how many gifts would be needed (for the children),” Harjala said. “The cut-off was 100, but the online registration form failed to cut off and they ended up with 300 kids registered. But God took care of that — the volunteer had received donations of 200 more gifts.

“I am so thankful that the LWML and others can help organizations such as these! Keep those Mites coming!”

May the favor of the Lord our God rest upon us; establish the work of our hands for us — yes, establish the work of our hands.

Psalm 90:17 (NIV)



A Mission Grant check for \$7,000 was presented to Julie Gillen, executive director of Compassion Closet Ministry, on Nov. 21. Pictured are, from left, Becky Grese, East Tennessee Zone president; Mary Krempasky, Grace, Knoxville, group president; Julie Gillen; and Sandie Harjala, LWML Mid-South District president. To learn more about LWML district Mission Grants, visit midsouthlwml.org/mission-grants.

Spread the love!

By Candy Habich

Chairman, LWML Mid-South District Media and Marketing Committee

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. **1 Cor. 13:4-7**

Who immediately thinks of weddings when reading or hearing these verses? And who doesn't think of Valentine's Day the moment you turn the calendar over to February? Of course, the day after Christmas stores are putting out the Valentine cards and candy. How could one possibly forget?

While the focus is on paper hearts and chocolate candy, are we truly thinking of

love? What about tough love, the unlovable, the broken hearts and, most of all, those who don't know the love of Jesus?

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. **1 John 4:7-9**

God is love. So simple, isn't it? And God's love was delivered directly to us by His Son, Jesus. And here's where we come in, so that we might live through Him. Yep, we have a part to play in this love story. We need to look around. Maybe it's a family member, a neighbor, a church buddy or a total stranger, but someone needs our love. So let's spread the love the way Jesus would. And maybe share some chocolate too.

ENDOWMENTS: Do you know someone special who deserves a special Valentine gift, but maybe they are one of those folks who doesn't need anything? Let them know how special they are by honoring them with a donation to the LWML Mid-South District Endowment Fund, which enables women in our district to attend events and training that they otherwise might not be able to afford. For more information, visit midsouthlwml.org/endowment-fund.

CONVENTION: Don't delay — secure your spot for the 2026 district convention, to be held June 12–14 in Springdale, Ark. Registration for convention and lodging is open. Visit midsouthlwml.org/district-convention and click the link under the logo.

FACEBOOK: Visit the new page at facebook.com/lwmlmsd. Share this in your groups and zones. It's one of the best ways for us to stay updated.

Camp Trinity

Linkt Senior High Retreat

Rev. Kory Janneke, pastor of St. Matthew, Conway, Ark., will be the main speaker at the Linkt retreat for our senior high youth of Mid-South District congregations.

The retreat will be held Feb. 27–March 1 under the theme “Because He Lives,” based on John 14:19. “Because I live, you also will live,” are words that Jesus spoke to His disciples in the upper room the night of his betrayal. Jesus’ resurrection three days later assures we too will rise again on the Last Day.

Pastor Janneke will speak about redemption, heaven and eternity, with a focus on the resurrection of all believers.

Registration is by congregation. **The early registration deadline is Feb. 8.** For those registered by this date, the cost is \$125. Registration after Feb. 8 is \$150.

Youth leaders can get registration forms from their church office, or request the forms from the Camp Trinity office at trinitypetitjean@gmail.com.

The retreat is open to youth in grades 9–12. Youth without a church home or from a congregation without a youth group attending can be assigned to another youth group. Contact the camp office to arrange this.

Linkt retreats include worship, singing, hikes, games, service projects, Bible study, campfires and fellowship.

Outdoor Classroom

The spring semester of Camp Trinity’s Outdoor Classroom for homeschooling families begins Feb. 25 and 26. The schedule of topics includes orienteering, folk music, physics, archeology, beekeeping, rock climbing and outdoor cooking.



Rev. David Witte, assistant pastor of Grace, Little Rock, will lead the Outdoor Classroom session on rock climbing. Pastor Witte also teaches rock climbing during Adventure Camp for high school students in the summer.

The students will also build cardboard boats, take a field trip to the Arkansas Heritage Museum, and compete in the annual field day.

Parents can choose either Wednesdays or Thursdays and register for individual classes or the entire semester at a steep discount.

Learn more and register at lutherancamp.org. The “Home School” link is at the top of the page.

Summer Camp 2026

Registration is open for summer camp. Parents can register their children at lutherancamp.org.

The season will again include six youth sessions and three family camps during

June and July. Camp activities include hiking, swimming, canoeing, large-group games, horseback riding, arts and crafts, and outdoor education.

Adventure camp for high school students also includes rock climbing, a river float trip and overnight tent camping.

Every day of camp includes First Word (Bible reading and devotions) before breakfast, Bible study and evening campfires, with lots of singing and a message about God’s love in Christ.

The camp is also seeking Christian young adults, ages 18–25, to serve on summer staff. To learn more and receive an application, email trinitypetitjean@gmail.com.

SHARE YOUR NEWS WITH US!

Send us your stories and photos for the April issue by Feb. 15. The issue will also highlight our district schools.

Digital files, sent via e-mail, are preferred. Our submission deadline is the 15th of each month, two months before publication. Photos must be sent in high resolution.

Send email submissions to LW@mid-southlcms.com or mail via U.S. Postal Service to Judy Otto; 150 N. Maury St.; Holly Springs, MS 38635