



/ JANUARY 2026

MID-SOUTH LUTHERAN

Grasping what Jesus said



In January, many of us will watch the NFL playoffs, leading up to the Super Bowl in February. This reminds me of a story about a college team whose star quarterback got injured toward the end of a game. The second-string quarterback was sick and didn't suit up. The third-string quarterback, recruited as a punter, played quarterback in high school but had never even taken a snap in college.

The team was down by four points and stuck on their own 3-yard line, 97 yards away from a touchdown. The coach put the third-string quarterback in, telling him, "All I want you to do is hand the ball to Kowalski. Run him up the middle. On the next play, send him through the same hole. That should give us enough room for the third play; you will



**Rev. Dr.
Roger Paavola**
District President

punt and give us a hope for better field position on our next possession."

"OK, coach. Got it!" the third-string quarterback replied. He took the first snap, gave the ball to Kowalski. He burst through the line for a 45-yard gain. At midfield, the quarterback called the same play, just like the coach told him. Kowalski ran for another 50 yards, three yards shy of a touchdown. The crowd went wild! Just a minute was left on the clock, but it looked like the third-string quarterback was going to lead the team to a touchdown and victory.

He took the next snap, dropped back and booted a short punt into the end zone. The crowd went silent. The coach went nuts. The players fell to the ground in disbelief. As the quarterback walked off the field, the coach screamed, "What in the world were you thinking when you punted the ball away?"

"Coach, I was thinking, 'What a dumb coach we have to tell me to punt on the third play.'"

There's an important point in this ridiculous story, and it's not about football. It's about our relationship with God. When God created mankind, He gave us the ability to make our own decisions; to call our own plays. He created us in His image and gave us the ability to understand, to reason and to choose.

Luke's Gospel (18:31–33) says these words:

And taking the twelve, he said to them, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. And after flogging him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise."

Think about what Jesus just said. Do we understand it? Obviously, the words are simple enough. But like most of the world, what Jesus meant by those words doesn't make sense.

Jesus took His apostles aside and told them these things. He, in fact, told them the same thing several times. Yet Luke 18:34 then says, "But they understood none of these things. This saying was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said."

Isn't that interesting? Are we, members of the Holy Christian Church, a little like that football coach who expected nothing great and failed to communicate the slightest bit of confidence or hope?

Can we accept the premise that Adam and Eve weren't the first parents, but rather God is the Father (our divine parent, if you wish) and Adam and Eve

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GOD'S WORD

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1)

were His first children? God put them in a garden paradise with the instruction to take care of it. It's your Garden of Eden. Do anything you want with it, except do not ever eat from the tree of knowing good and evil. But, just like most kids, the next part of the conversation went something like, "OK God, so where is this tree with forbidden fruit?"

It wasn't long before Adam and Eve acted like us. They ate of the forbidden fruit to see what the problem was. When God asked, "Why'd you do that?"; Adam responded, "That woman You gave me made me do it!"

But then we're presented with an interesting insight. God said, "You can't live in here anymore," and with that God told Adam and Eve to go forth and multiply. Having children was part of a curse. Was God giving us a lesson on parenting, as if we should have known better?

Jesus told the disciples what was about to happen, but it just didn't sink in.

St. Paul tells us why. He writes:

None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

1 Cor. 2:8

Not only didn't the disciples understand what Jesus was saying, but neither did the governor, the high priest, the Roman soldiers, the Sanhedrin and the public understand what they were about to do to the King of glory.

We're nearing the sacred season of Lent. We remember that on Calvary's hill, while the Roman soldiers were driving crude nails into Christ's hands and feet, while Jesus was writhing in pain and dying, Satan must have been saying, "I've won! I've beaten God! Divine Righteousness is dying!" All of this took place because Satan, the world, the leaders, the citizens of earth didn't understand Christ's words.

It wasn't until three days later that Satan realized that he made a huge mistake. Satan must have been thinking, "I did everything the way I laid it out. I led people to kill the Prince of Peace and



the King of kings. I helped crucify the King of Glory and now look ... He's risen from the dead! Now everyone who's on His team, everyone who's joined together in Him, through His Means of Grace, is saved. My only weapon, death, has no power over Him or anyone He has gathered around Him."

St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. **1 Cor. 1:18**

After the Resurrection, the Holy Spirit opened the minds of Christ's disciples. The pieces of the puzzle fit together. Without the cross and without the Resurrection, none of the other pieces made sense. The very idea of a cross and the death of God's only Son sounded too much like agony and defeat. The shedding of blood from God's precious, incarnate body didn't sound anything like raising up new life.

But what was once considered foolishness suddenly became divine wisdom. When we stand on this side of the Resurrection, the Holy Spirit opens our hearts and minds to receive exactly what God intended for us to receive — for us to have a victory in Christ Jesus, for us to have power and strength through our Savior's suffering and death.

Here's the power to change lives: Christ crucified, Christ arisen, Christ ascended and Christ coming again in glory everlasting. Here's the strength to live in joy in the midst of troubles and heartaches, suffering and pain. Suddenly everything God's Word says makes sense. We don't need to worry about Satan's strength. Christ defeated Him for us. We have no fear of death because Jesus conquered it for our sake.

We'll never know the misery of what Jesus went through on the cross, all for us

and our salvation! But what the Bible does tell us is that Jesus died for the sins of the world: every sin that has ever been committed and ever will be. Christ Jesus died for all sins and suffered the righteous punishment of God against them for our sake. He was weighed down with the burden of all our sins for every age and every generation.

We'll never know the loneliness He felt when He hung on the cross, abandoned by His closest friends and His entire nation. We'll never know what went on in heaven as the Father turned His face from His own Son as He died. Every time we read those haunting, mysterious words, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?," we read words we can hear, but we will never fully understand how God can forsake His Son in order to accept us. We'll never know how an eternal and unchangeable God can suffer and die. We'll never understand how the eternal and almighty God can become one of us — fragile, faced with temptations — and live among us and allow Himself to die for wretched and hateful people.

We'll never fully know (at least on this side of eternity) how God designed His salvation plan just so you and I can live in His victory and the blessed hope of a life in a paradise, offered to us by the same Son of Man who died for our sins. Yet one day, when we enter into the place Jesus has prepared for us, we'll see — just as He explained — an eternal, glorious and amazing paradise. The last piece of the puzzle will fit perfectly in place.

Now we can only understand this: There is only one sacrifice God accepted for our soul's salvation. There is only one way for us to receive the forgiveness of our sins. There's only one plan of salvation. It's all about Jesus Christ and God's grace to give us this blessed assurance.

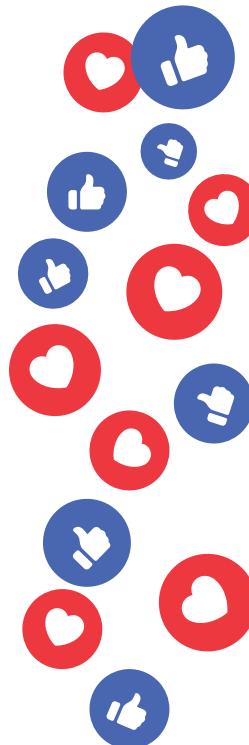
Soon, we will begin a seven-week journey to prepare for the most glorious day of victory. Prepare. Listen. Hear. Learn. Let us ever punt away the glory, majesty and grace by our frail human reason. Rest fully in the wisdom of God. Rejoice in the victory of His salvation plan, offered through His Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.



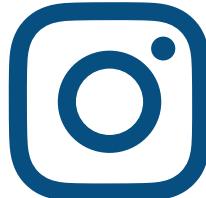
Christ the King Lutheran School, Memphis, is blessed to have three student teachers, who attend Concordia University, Nebraska (CUNE), join the school family through the end of the fall term.

They are, from left, Isabella Wolter (kindergarten), Montgomery "Mo" Berner (preschool) and Bethany Gebhardt (second grade).

All three students are seniors at CUNE and will graduate in the spring. We hope they enjoy their time in Memphis — and the Mid-South District!



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District offering workshops for treasurers

Congregational treasurers are urged to attend one of the Mid-South District's free Treasurers' Workshops, to be held this month. For more information and to register, visit mid-southlcms.org/2026-treasurers-workshop.

Workshop dates and locations are:

- Jan. 3, Grace Lutheran Church (9076 Middlebrook Pike), Knoxville
- Jan. 10, Our Savior Lutheran Church (5110 Franklin Pike), Nashville
- Jan. 17, Hope Lutheran Church (1904 McArthur Blvd.), Jacksonville, Ark.
- Jan. 24, Salem Lutheran Ministries (1800 W. Emma Ave.), Springdale, Ark.
- Jan. 31, Mid-South District office (1675 Wynne Road), Cordova, Tenn.



Congregation mission commitment receipts

as of Oct. 31, 2025 (10 months)

Anticipated amount (83% of budget) \$1,357,247

Actual receipts \$1,321,351

Over (under) anticipated amount (\$35,896)

Use of mission commitment receipts

Allocated to Synod for world missions \$375,572

Allocated to Tanzania \$20,833

Retained for district ministry/mission support (70% of receipts) \$924,946

Total receipts \$1,321,351

Mission commitment receipts comparison

Actual receipts as of Oct. 31, 2025 \$1,321,351

Actual receipts as of Oct. 31, 2024 \$1,353,661

Over (under) prior year receipts (\$32,310)



DISTRICT NEWS

EDUCATION

Snow Day reminders



Michelle Fischer
Executive Director,
Education, Youth
and Family Ministry

As the calendar flips to winter, my thoughts return to my time as a principal and the possibility of snow days. I remember the challenges they brought to staff and parents — rescheduling activities, shuffling meetings, and trying to prepare for the unexpected. Nothing, however, compared to the pure joy in children's eyes when snowflakes began to fall.

I can still picture those mornings standing at my window at 4 a.m., watching the first flurries drift down. I knew my phone would soon light up with calls and texts, while simultaneously I heard the squeals of delight from my own children as they woke to a winter wonderland.

In Kansas City, snow days were expected each year, a familiar rhythm of the season. Now that I live in Memphis, snow days are rare, and even the hint of snow causes dread in adults while filling children with excitement and hope.

There is something wondrous about watching the world transform under a light dusting of snow, reminding us of our Creator's handiwork and the blessings He gives in small moments. Those unexpected snow days taught me that sometimes the best lessons happen when lesson plans and schedules are set aside.

Children understand what we often forget: that joy is a gift of God's grace. As Psalm 118:24 declares: "This is the day that the **LORD** has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it."

As we step into the new year, my prayer is to receive each day with thanksgiving and to trust more fully in Christ rather than my own plans. I pray for deeper gratitude for His mercy and for a heart that rests in the assurance that each day is a gift from our gracious God, an opportunity to live in the joy of our salvation through Jesus Christ our Lord.

NATIONAL LUTHERAN SCHOOLS WEEK

Let's Make a Joyful Noise

PSALM 98:4

2026

National Lutheran Schools Week (NLSW)

celebrates our Lutheran schools in providing quality education while proclaiming God's love and forgiveness. NLSW will be held Jan. 25-31. Many schools will have special events and worship and chapel services throughout the week. This is the perfect time to discover how Lutheran schools reach children and families with the Gospel of Jesus Christ! Support your Lutheran school in prayer, financially and by volunteering!

Rev. Larry Keim was ordained and installed as associate pastor of Chapel of the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Sharps Chapel, Tenn., on Nov. 15. Pastor Keim completed the Specific Ministry Pastor program of Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne.

Pictured are, from left (bottom row) Revs. David Graves, St. Paul, Wartburg; Dr. Roger Paavola, district president; Larry Keim, Paul Kritsch, Chapel of the Good Shepherd senior pastor; Ed Maanum, First, Knoxville; (top row) Danny Anderson, Grace, Knoxville; Michael Miller, Redeemer, Harriman; Derek Roberts, Praise, Maryville; Adam Woldt, The Point, Knoxville; and Chase Lefort, Faith, Oak Ridge.



Rev. Jeffrey King was installed as pastor of Our Shepherd, Searcy, Ark., on Oct. 19. Pastor King (right), who had previously served Our Shepherd part-time, is pictured with Rev. Dr. Roger Paavola, district president.



Thank you to the youth group of **Friends In Christ, Bryant, Ark.**, for assembling blessing boxes for Operation Christmas Child through Samaritan's Purse. Thank you to members who donated supplies and ordered boxes online. Our goal was 20, and at this mid-November writing, we had 34 boxes ready to give! Grateful for the generosity of our church; and thank you, Deborah Shipley, for leading the youth in this wonderful service project! Youth Group members pictured are, from left, Ellie Shipley, Sammy Cox, Hunter Dobbs, Marabeth Needler and Sam Koch.

— Submitted by Rev. Emil Woerner, pastor, Friends in Christ Lutheran Church, Bryant, Ark.

DISTRICT NEWS

Faith Lutheran Church,
Fairfield Bay, Ark., welcomed
new members to its family.

RIGHT: Rev. Donald Hefta
welcomes, from left, Caron
Anderson; Isabel Richards
and her daughter, Mabel; the
Richards family, Noah and
parents Michael and Amy; and
Terry and Fuzzy Clark.

BELOW RIGHT: Pastor Hefta
also baptized Isabel and Mabel.

BELOW: Members of the Martin
family were baptized: father
Josh and children Hudson and
twins Ivie and Sterling.



You're invited to nominate a student for LSM 2026. **Lutheran Summer Music (LSM)** is a faith-based residential music academy for high school students (grades 8-12) who gather from all over the country to immerse themselves in musical excellence and build an intentional, supportive and fun community.

LSM 2026 will be held at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minn., June 21-July 19 (full session) or June 21-July 3 (half session).

Nominate students at Ismacademy.org/nominate, and watch and share the LSM video at Ismacademy.org/lsmvideo.





NEW YEAR GREETINGS

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. **2 Cor. 5:17-18**

By Candy Habich

Chairman, LWML Mid-South District
Media and Marketing Committee

The beginning of a new year seems like a good time to ponder 2 Corinthians 5. Particularly, in verses 17-18, the reminder that we are all new creations through our relationship with Jesus. And we can breathe a sigh of relief that the old has passed away.

Isn't that sort of like making New Year's resolutions? We commit to establishing some good habits and attempt to eliminate some bad habits. But really, shouldn't we just rejoice in knowing that we are completely new creations with no effort on our part? We just need to line up our thoughts and behaviors with what we confess.

We can thank God that He gave us His only Son so that we might be reconciled to Him. What a gift! We don't need the latest fitness gadgets or self-help manuals. We need God's Word in our minds and our hearts. By focusing on what Christ has done for us, we can then share that Good News with others.

Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

2 Cor. 5:20-21

God's peace be with you.

Life Ministry events

January brings a focus on life ministries. The 2026 National March for Life will be held in Washington, D.C., on Friday, Jan. 23.

To find other Life events, visit the LCMS Life Ministry page at lcms.org/life-ministry.

We praise God for all the life ministries around the country, and we also thank God for the Lutheran Women in Mission who support those ministries.



LWML Mid-South District CONVENTION

June 12-14
Springdale, Ark.



Lodging and business sessions will be at the Holiday Inn Springdale/Fayetteville. Opening worship on Friday will be at Salem Lutheran Church, Springdale.

The keynote speaker will be Deaconess Dr. Tiffany Manor, LCMS Managing Director, Human Care and Ministerial Support.

Register now at midsouthlwml.org/district-convention-2026-main-menu.

I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. **Ps. 121:1-2**

New Facebook URL

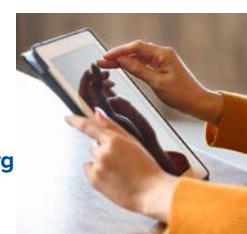
Just a reminder that our new Facebook page is at facebook.com/LWMLMSD. Please share this with the ladies in your groups and zones. It's one of the best ways for us to keep you up to date in a timely manner. Thanks for your help!



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DISTRICT NEWS

Camp Trinity

Summer Camp

On the night Jesus was betrayed, He gathered with His disciples in the upper room beforehand to prepare them for what was coming. To give them comfort during the dark, fear-filled days ahead, He promised to return. He said:

"I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live." **John 14:18-19**

Today we followers of Christ also take comfort in these words, knowing Jesus will return on the Last Day to take us to be with Him.

"I Will Come to You" is the theme for Summer Camp 2026 at Camp Trinity, the Lutheran camp on Petit Jean Mountain. Campers will explore this theme in Bible studies and evening messages led by Aaron Davis, camp director — aka "Mountain Man" — and summer staff.

The summer 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 morning of camp begins with First Word (Bible reading and devotions) before breakfast, staff-led Bible study after breakfast, and campfires in the evening, with lots of singing and a message about God's love in Christ.

Registration for summer camp opened Jan. 1. Parents can register their children at the camp website: lutherancamp.org.

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



Youth at summer camp start their day with a wakeup song.

Outdoor Classroom

The spring semester of Camp Trinity's Outdoor Classroom for homeschooling families is still under development, but registration has already begun. Each semester lasts 10 weeks, and parents can choose either Wednesdays or Thursdays.

Teaching is geared toward children ages 6-14, but whole families, from toddlers to grandparents, are welcome to attend. Learn more and register at lutherancamp.org. The "Home School" link is at the top of the page.



SHARE YOUR NEWS WITH US!

Digital files, sent via e-mail, are preferred. Send email submissions to LW@mid-southlcms.com or send by postal mail to:

Judy Otto; 150 N. Maury St.; Holly Springs, MS 38635

Send us your stories and photos for our **March 2026** issue by **Jan. 15**.

**A Blessed and
Happy New Year
to all!**

