

TOGETHER *Synod Convention edition*



July 31–August 3, 2017

Our great heritage

A beautiful church packed with more than 700 booming voices all passionately singing out “A Mighty Fortress” set the tone for WELS’ 64th biennial synod convention. The theme for this year’s convention is “Our Great Heritage,” a distinctive Lutheran nod to the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation being celebrated by Christians around the world this year. “Our Great Heritage” reminds convention delegates and attendees that our faith is rooted in the teachings of Martin Luther, whose mission was to teach Christians of his day, and for centuries after, that the Bible is the only true Word of God.

WELS President Rev. Mark Schroeder presided over the opening worship service, Mon., July 31, at St. Mark’s in Watertown, Wis. Rev. Jonathan Schroeder, Faith, Sharpsburg, Ga., served as preacher, delivering a sermon reflecting on Martin Luther’s famous statement, “Here I stand.”

“If we can be known as the church that proclaims radical grace, that’s an excellent thing because that’s where the church has stood and I hope that’s where we stand in the next 500 years,” he says. “The privilege of being able to speak to the convention and being asked to share God’s Word with them, especially on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, it was a wonderful honor.”

President Schroeder presented his “President’s Report” Tuesday morning. After discussing the state of the synod and how WELS ministry reflects principles of our Lutheran heritage, he concluded:

“As we mark 500 years of the Lutheran Reformation, we pray that God will move us to rededicate ourselves to the biblical truths that God so graciously restored to his church and which he has passed down to us as the heirs of that Reformation. In every sermon preached, in every Bible class taught, in every opportunity to share what we believe, may he enable us to know and confess that we are saved by God’s grace alone, that we receive that blessing through faith alone, and that we are sure of that truth because of Scripture alone. Holding on to that heritage, we will by God’s grace be permitted to share in the glorious privilege of serving as his witnesses, and we will have the joy of passing that heritage down to the next generations of God’s people.”

Continuing with the theme, Prof. John Brenner read the convention essay. He titled it “God’s Word is our great heritage.”

Brenner says, “Through the Reformation, God delivered some really tremendous gifts to his people, but Lutherans really have not always retained those gifts as other Christians, including Old Testament people, didn’t either. So I wanted to emphasize how great our heritage is and the fact because it’s that great, we want to do everything in our power to preserve it, but then also to share it.”

This is the second synod convention essay that Brenner had the privilege to present. He teaches systematic theology, Christian doctrine, and church history at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis., where he’s served for 26 years. ☪

Ministry Financial Plan steady

Tuesday morning WELS Chief Financial Officer Mr. Todd Poppe presented the state of the synod’s Ministry Financial Plan (budget) to delegates. While the ministry financial plan is well documented in the Book of Reports and Memorials (page 127), Poppe reminded delegates that while God greatly blesses our synod, the harvest fields are vast and there is work to do.

Congregation Mission Offerings (CMO) are the main source of support for WELS ministry. While CMO has slightly increased, it is not keeping up with inflation, and therefore, has remained flat for about 10 years, creating an increasing strain at maintaining ministries at current levels and using up reserves.

As Poppe explains, “The proposed ministry financial plan keeps WELS on solid financial ground, but projected near-flat Congregation Mission Offerings when costs are increasing 3.5 percent could challenge WELS’ ability to maintain ministries beyond the 2017–19 biennium.”

In order to maintain existing ministry with these rising costs and flat revenue, the Synodical Council authorized a greater use of reserves in the ministry financial plan being presented for the upcoming biennium. As these reserves are drawn down, funding future ministry becomes more difficult unless offerings increase.

The Financial Stabilization Fund (FSF) continues to be sound. The FSF holds all non-CMO sources of support for one or more years after receipt, allowing for more stable financial planning. Poppe provided an update to the convention

**All convention documents and resources can be found at
wels.net/2017synodconvention.**

regarding that FSF, noting that since BORAM has been printed, unexpected gifts to WELS have put the FSF in a more favorable situation.

New this summer, WELS congregations, schools, and other organizations are encouraged to consider Church Mutual for organizational insurance needs. Church Mutual and WELS have joined in a group insurance program, where WELS congregations, schools, and organizations can benefit from a safety dividend, which equates to a cost savings, through Church Mutual. Poppe says, "WELS has entrusted the coverage of its buildings, property, and people to Church Mutual for more than 40 years. As we look around at our many blessings, it makes sense to protect God's gifts in the best possible way, so that we can continue to expand ministry."

Most notably, Poppe and President Mark Schroeder marked the retirement of the synod's debt by shredding a copy of the debt statement. Two years ago, the synod in convention voted to launch a campaign to retire the debt early. Through God's grace, WELS members offered their gifts to support this goal, and the debt was paid off a year and a half ahead of schedule.

To read the full financial report, view the BORAM online at wels.net/2017synodconvention. ☩

Treptow explains Compensation Review Committee recommendations

On Tuesday morning, Rev. Earle Treptow, chairman of the Compensation Review Committee and a professor at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis., detailed the recommendations of the Compensation Review Committee. The group is a standing committee of the Synodical Council, but it took on a more active role after the 2015 synod in convention approved a resolution calling for a "thorough review" of the WELS Compensation Guidelines.

"In the early stages of the project, the committee envisioned a radical reworking of the guidelines currently in place," says Treptow. "The more we wrestled with the issues, however, the more we recognized the excellent work that had been done in putting together the current compensation guidelines. The problem has been that calling bodies haven't consistently applied the guidelines."

Once the committee arrived at that realization, the focus shifted away from a complete revision toward a modification of the current guidelines.

As Treptow notes, "Much of the inconsistency in applying the guidelines stemmed from a lack of understanding. So, the Compensation Review Committee committed itself to repackaging the compensation guidelines in such a way that calling bodies would find them easier to apply. Only slight modifications were made to the current guidelines, so the financial impact on the work we do together as a synod should be minimal."

During his presentation to delegates, Treptow showed delegates the new web-based calculator that can help calling

bodies to determine a fair and equitable compensation package for their called workers. WELS Technology created this calculator to replace the existing Excel worksheet that Human Resources provides to calling bodies working on called worker compensation. This new called worker compensation calculator automates many of the tasks that previously required research and data entry by calling bodies.

Treptow emphasized to delegates, "What the Compensation Review Committee desires, above all else, is that calling bodies would approach compensation matters prayerfully, thoughtfully, and carefully. We want calling bodies, through their leaders, to think about the gospel ministry being carried out in their midst. More specifically, we want them to reflect on the responsibilities entrusted to each worker, the time that is being invested in carrying out those responsibilities, and the additional education the worker has pursued. Then the calling body can determine a salary based on knowledge of, and appreciation for, the important work the Lord's servant is doing in its name."

Floor Committee #8: Compensation Review is discussing the Compensation Review Committee's recommendations and will present one or more resolutions later in this convention for consideration by all the delegates. ☩

Convention includes several special guests

Pastors from several sister church bodies and from other Lutheran synods attended the WELS synod convention as special guests. WELS President Mark Schroeder introduced these men to the delegates Tuesday morning.

Four of these guests are from church bodies with whom WELS will be declaring fellowship during the convention: Rev. Dr. Kebede Yigezu from the Lutheran Church of Ethiopia; Rev. Titus Tse from South Asian Lutheran Evangelical Mission (Hong Kong); and two pastors from East Asia Lutheran Synod. More information about the fellowship declarations will be in tomorrow's edition of Together.

Rev. Glenn Obenberger, the first vice president of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS), will be addressing delegates on Wednesday about our sister synod based in Minnesota. Since its formation in 1918, this church body of about 19,000 souls in 130 congregations has been in fellowship with WELS.

Rev. Michael Eichstadt is visiting from the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC). Representatives from WELS, the ELS, and the CLC have been meeting over the past few years in formal doctrinal discussions to determine whether the three synods are still separated by doctrinal differences. Convention delegates will be voting whether or not to approve a statement that representatives from these three church bodies drafted that addresses the question of when church bodies in fellowship should separate if false doctrine appears. Formal doctrinal discussions will be continuing in the future.

A representative from the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS), Rev. Dr. Jon Vieker, is observing the convention. Over the past five years, WELS, the ELS, and the LCMS have been

Kobleske says he has been happy to be able to serve the synod in this way. "Leaders lead, but there's always someone helping the leaders," he says. "In the body of Christ, that's how it's supposed to be. If we all do our part, then things go well." He shared how school staff and volunteers worked together to set up the campus, to provide meals and snacks, to coordinate the technology, to shuttle delegates to the airport, and to ensure that the convention runs smoothly.

His favorite part of the convention? "It's being able to see all these people from different places come together and to be able to talk to them. I'm grateful to have the privilege to serve this way."

The next synod convention will be held at Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn., in 2019. ☩

All convention documents and resources can be found at wels.net/2017synodconvention.



To sign up for the e-mail version, visit wels.net/together.

Mr. Danny Wehmeyer, a lay delegate from Good Shepherd, Deltona, Fla., appreciated seeing all the scholars share insights on Luther, as well as the strong emphasis on grace seen in the movie. “To understand the man [Luther] and how he literally changed Christianity and to understand that it really is grace from God—it’s like the biggest weight of the world off of everybody’s shoulders once they understand it,” he says.

A question and answer session with the film’s executive producer, Mr. Steve Boettcher, and author of the companion book *Luther’s Protest*, Rev. John Braun, followed the screening.

Boettcher shared how one mission congregation in Michigan that normally has 40 to 50 people in worship had more than 150 people come to the movie—providing a whole new set of prospects.

At the session, Boettcher also announced that a version of the film will be airing on PBS at 7 p.m. CT, Sept. 12. Three hundred sixty PBS stations across the United States will show the film. The film will also be shown throughout Canada by the Canadian Broadcasting Company. Marcus Cinemas also will be hosting screenings of the film in October at 50 theaters across eight states.

Congregations and WELS organizations are continuing to use the movie as an outreach tool. One hundred congregations have screenings planned in September and October. St. Paul and St. John, congregations in New Ulm, Minn., have already shown the film to a sold-out theater in New Ulm. The congregations plan to host another screening for their members and then partner with Martin Luther College (MLC) in New Ulm to host a screening on MLC’s campus for the local community. “With MLC being a landmark in

New Ulm, it’s also a way we can show the community the connection between the churches and MLC,” says Mr. Brad Price, a member at St. John.

Congregations still can host local screenings of the film. Find out how at wels.net/reformation500.

Convention resolutions set direction for the future

On Wednesday afternoon, delegates heard the first reports and resolutions from the convention floor committees.

Delegates overwhelmingly approved the resolutions to declare fellowship with three international church bodies—the Lutheran Church of Ethiopia, East Asia Lutheran Synod, and South Asian Evangelical Lutheran Mission.

Discussion ensued when a resolution was presented to require all early childhood and Lutheran elementary schools to annually require a \$7.50 fee per student and all high schools to pay a \$4.00 fee per student to help support the work of the Commission on Lutheran Schools. Since 2007, schools have been encouraged to give a voluntary supplemental contribution to assist with Lutheran Schools’ operating costs. Delegates who spoke against the motion

believe that these costs should be included in the WELS ministry financial plan (budget). The motion was defeated. A motion did subsequently pass encouraging delegates to “strongly encourage all of their schools to participate in the voluntary supplemental contribution.”

On Thursday, floor committee chairmen continued presenting their reports and resolutions. Most resolutions passed with little or no discussion, including resolutions to support the synod’s new long-range plan; to adopt the Synodical Council’s unfunded priority list, which helps allocate additional resources received above those projected by the ministry financial plan; and to revise the called worker compensation guidelines as recommended by the Compensation Review Committee.

Delegates did discuss the resolution to adopt the Synodical Council’s proposed ministry financial plan. Some concern was expressed about the amount of support for the Board for Ministerial Education, particularly for Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn. The amount of debt for Martin Luther College graduates has been an issue of concern in recent years. Other delegates noted that adding support to one area of ministry means that support would need to be removed from another area. The resolution was adopted.

Synod leaders will now move forward during the next biennium to help carry out the direction that was supported by convention delegates.

The new long-range plan, the unfunded priority list, the recommendations of the Compensation Review Committee, and details of the ministry financial plan are all included in the *2017 Book of Reports and Memorials*. ☩

Hosting the synod convention

For the 64th biennial convention, delegates enjoyed the beautiful campus of Luther Preparatory School (LPS), Watertown, Wis., one of WELS’ four ministerial education schools. The convention location rotates between three of the school campuses, Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn.; Michigan Lutheran Seminary, Saginaw, Mich.; and Luther Preparatory School.

“It’s important for [ministerial education schools] to host [the conventions] because these schools are owned and operated by WELS so all of these delegates here—this is their school. They support it in every way,” says Rev. Matthew Crass, LPS president. “And then they come to these schools for these conventions and they get a taste for what ministerial education is all about and how we are doing what the Lord Jesus asked us to do—bringing the reapers into his field for the harvest.”

The LPS staff works closely with leaders and staff at the Center for Mission and Ministry to plan the convention. Rev. Roger Kobleske, an LPS professor, has served as the school’s convention coordinator since 1999. This will be his last time serving as convention coordinator due to his retirement this year. WELS President Mark Schroeder publicly thanked Kobleske for his service Thursday morning.

meeting for informal discussions to clarify where our synods agree and where disagreements remain. Another meeting is scheduled for later this year.

Finally Rev. Michael Herbst and his son Daniel traveled from Germany to the convention. Herbst, pastor at St. Johanneskirche, Zwickau-Planitz, is thrilled to represent our sister synod the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church (ELFK) in Germany at the WELS convention during this 500th anniversary year of the Reformation. “I’m very thankful to be invited,” he says. He especially enjoyed the opening worship service and being able to sing and celebrate the Lord’s Supper, all believing the same thing—“one voice,” he says. Herbst will share more with delegates about the ELFK and its work to share the pure gospel in Germany in a presentation on Wednesday. ☩

Election of first vice president and secretary

On Tuesday morning, Rev. James Huebner was re-elected to his third four-year term as first vice president of WELS. He was first elected to the position in 2009.

“I’m just humbly grateful. It’s a privilege and an honor to be able to serve the Lord in this way, especially to be able to have the chance to work with such wonderful gifts of the church in the men who are in leadership in the church body,” says Huebner, who serves as pastor at Grace, Milwaukee, Wis.

He continues, “You know what the Word of God says about us personally and you look in your heart and know you don’t deserve to have this privilege to be in the ministry in general and then also to serve the synod. But then you thank God also for his promises that he’s going to give you the strength and the insight.”

The first vice president assists the president and serves as a member of the Conference of Presidents; as a non-voting, ex-officio vice chairman of the Synodical Council; and as an advisory member on the Commission on Inter-Church Relations.

On Tuesday, delegates also elected Rev. Robert Pasbrig as the WELS recording secretary. Pasbrig has served as synod secretary since 2005.

Elections for chairmen and members for various synod boards and commissions will be conducted throughout the convention. Look for full election results at the conclusion of the convention at wels.net/2017synodconvention. ☩

Reformation celebration continues

Celebration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation continued on Wednesday, with presentations that highlighted Reformation history as well as shared materials and ways for congregations and individuals to celebrate the Reformation.

Rev. Michael Herbst, vice president of the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church (ELFK) in Germany, shared more about the history of our sister church and how the ELFK continues to reach out in the land of the Reformation.

Rev. John Braun, chairman of the Reformation 500 Committee, reported on available Reformation 500 resources, including Bible studies and a children’s film taken from the popular Martin Luther film, *A Return to Grace: Luther’s Life and Legacy*. He highlighted that the committee’s goals are to educate members on our Lutheran heritage but also to use the interest in the anniversary as a way to reach out into local communities. Learn more about these resources and special Reformation events at wels.net/reformation500.

Congregations around the synod have been sponsoring viewings of *A Return to Grace* as one way to educate members and reach out. Delegates were treated to a special viewing of the film on Wednesday evening, which included a question and answer period with the film’s executive producer, Mr. Steve Boettcher, and author of the companion book *Luther’s Protest*, Rev. John Braun. Learn more about the movie in tomorrow’s issue of “Together.”

To celebrate the anniversary, the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference (CELC) decided to prepare a new “Ninety-five Theses for the 21st century.” Fifteen pastors from around the world put together the document, which was approved by the CELC at its triennial convention in Grimma, Germany, this past summer. “The nature of these theses is very different than Luther’s original ones,” says Prof. Thomas Nass, one of the men leading the development of the theses. “It’s really the basic teachings of the Lutheran faith organized according to the Small Catechism. I think it’s what every Lutheran layperson should know.”

A video of confessional Lutherans from around the world reading some of these theses was shown to delegates Wednesday afternoon. A full video presentation of these theses will be posted online as well as streamed on Oct. 31, 2017, to give confessional Lutherans around the world an opportunity to celebrate our shared beliefs. Learn more about the CELC at celc.info.

Finally, special common chests were built by Mr. Kevin Kopplin, a member of Lord of Life, DeForest, Wis., to show how Lutherans financed their needs following the separation from the Roman Church during Martin Luther’s time. “Members deposited their offerings into the chest and elected a group of directors to manage the funds,” says Rev. John Braun. “Our world is different now. Doctrine hasn’t changed, and we still collect money to carry out the work of proclaiming the gospel and helping others. But now, banks, checks, electronic giving, and combination safes are what’s common. The common chest may have disappeared, but the idea is a part of our collections, budgets, and treasurer’s reports.”

To commemorate the Reformation anniversary, the chests were used to collect the offering from the opening worship service as well as special gifts from delegates for the three Lutheran church bodies with whom WELS declared fellowship during this convention. ☩

God’s expanding kingdom

On Wednesday evening, the synod convention delegates had the privilege to listen to presentations from four WELS missionaries serving around the world, including Rev. Paul Nitz,

Malawi; Rev. John Hartmann; Zambia; Rev. Luke Wolfgramm, Russia; and a missionary from East Asia.

Nitz is based in Malawi and is the coordinator of the newly formed One Africa team, which is working to coordinate mission efforts across the continent for more cohesive programs and worker training.

Nitz has seen the Lutheran Church of Central Africa grow and become increasingly independent in the two decades he's been there. Now, with the One Africa team, the mission efforts there are being taken a step further. He says, "What gets me excited is that we're going to do work better, improve together, we're going to know more about what each other is doing in different fields, and we're going to collaborate and cooperate a lot more." He says that after years of WELS missionaries helping the national churches in Africa, the missionaries and the national churches have reached more of a consultancy stage.

Wolfgramm appreciated the opportunity to present the gospel work happening in Russia to the convention. "This is the body that called me to go out and preach God's Word on behalf of WELS, kind of like how Paul went back to Antioch after his first missionary journey to report on what was going and the believers rejoiced. That's what it felt like last night, to come back and share all the good things God is doing in Russia," he says.

Wolfgramm says that when WELS started mission work in Russia 25 years ago, it was a planting effort. There was no Lutheran church in Russia. Today, there are four Russian national pastors and the missionary's role has changed to be more of a partner with the Russian church.

A missionary from East Asia talked about the growing gospel work there. "It's really important to have an opportunity like this to speak in person, because we can't share a lot of information digitally or online. To have an opportunity to present our work to people who can go back and share it with their congregations is really important. The important thing to know about East Asia is all the progress that has been made there. We have a synod there; we have national pastors that have graduated from the seminary and are leading their churches."

On Wednesday morning, World Missions Administrator Rev. Larry Schlomer gave an overview of expanding opportunities to spread the gospel around the world. Since the last synod convention in 2015, WELS has made contact and been involved in some capacity with 14 new mission fields around the world. With these new fields, there are close to 50 world fields, ranging from places where WELS sends missionaries to locales with contacts from national churches to groups that are using the multitude of confessional Lutheran materials from Multi-Language Publications available.

Schlomer says, "What the Lord is doing around the world—the way he's lining up some of these opportunities—is something I don't think we've seen in our synod in a while, if ever. So it's a real challenge for us to take a look around and see where God has placed us in the world, look at the resources he has given us, and see what we might be able to do to get the gospel to more people."

While there are many exciting and new opportunities around the world, one of WELS' most prominent mission fields is right here in the U.S. Chairman of the Board for Home Missions Rev. Wayne Uhlhorn says, "There's a lot of really good mission work that's happening right down the street in our neighborhoods and cities across America and in Canada where we can reach out with the gospel in an increasingly secular world. We've heard that in some of these neighborhoods, people just aren't going to church anymore and they're confused on what the truth is, so we can do a lot of mission work by starting new missions, expanding congregations to have a second site, and reaching people who don't know Jesus so they can learn about salvation."

To learn more about WELS Missions, visit wels.net/missions. ☩

Hein shares results of demographic survey

Rev. Jonathan Hein, director of the WELS Commission on Congregational Counseling, has overseen a comprehensive demographic survey of WELS over the past two years, and he shared key findings with delegates on Wednesday afternoon.

After peaking in 1990 at more than 420,000 souls, WELS' baptized membership has decreased by 14 percent. Communicant membership is down 9 percent. Four items were identified as contributing factors to this decline:

- Families today are having fewer children.
- The number of WELS members dying and going to heaven is increasing as the overall population ages.
- It has grown increasingly difficult to retain members, especially younger members. Since 1986, WELS lost between 240,000-260,000 members through removal/excommunication or from those members joining other Christian churches. These are sometimes referred to as "back door losses."
- Fewer people are living in rural areas, and this is impacting more than 100 churches who now face the "50/60 challenge"—fewer than 50 people worship each week and the average age worshiping is above 60 years old.

As Hein notes, "When you hear numbers like this, it can be easy to grow discouraged. Don't. Christ is still risen. He still sits on his throne, ruling over everything for the benefit of his church. Through Word and sacrament, he still abides with us."

Last fall, Hein and the other members of the Congregational Services team met and discussed how to meet these challenges. "Obviously, some of the factors contributing to WELS' statistical decline are beyond our control—for example, the rising death rate," says Hein. "However, there are other areas where, by God's grace and with his aid, we might be able to increase our gospel efforts—evangelism, decreasing back door losses, etc. Congregational Services has put together a five-year strategy that we pray helps congregations as they strive to meet these challenges."

Highlights of that five-year strategy include:

- Creating a present-day mission emphasis—The Commission on Evangelism is developing a comprehensive evangelism

curriculum that congregations can use to offer annual evangelism training and encouragement. Hein reminds us, "The results of increased evangelism efforts are entirely up to the Holy Spirit. However, if he would bless those efforts, it could make a substantial impact."

- Better capitalizing on WELS' historic strengths—WELS maintains one of the largest private school systems in the country. The greatest growth in the past 20 years has been in early childhood ministries, which often attract unchurched families. Only a few congregations have seen these families become members of their churches, though. The common factor among these congregations is a "harvest strategy" that includes regular contact with parents and a process of witnessing. The Commissions on Lutheran Schools and Evangelism have jointly developed a program titled "Telling the Next Generation: Utilizing Our Schools for Outreach" that helps congregations develop a zealous harvest strategy.
- Producing resources for Millennial outreach and retention—Several WELS organizations have been studying Millennials and their worldviews. Congregational Services would like to bring those groups together to compile a "best practices" list in reaching this demographic. This task force would develop resources to help congregations retain its young adults and to reach other Millennials within the community.

"This project is a central focus for our synod going forward," says WELS President Mark Schroeder. "You'll hear more about specific ideas and overall progress as the plan rolls out. Remember, we have the unchanging gospel . . . and that's at the core of everything we do."

Hein agrees. He says, "One of the catch-phrases we use in the Commission on Congregational Counseling goes like this: 'If we are doing all we can with the gospel, numbers don't matter.' The challenges before us provide us with an opportunity to examine if we are indeed 'doing all we can with the gospel.' Let us view the challenges facing WELS as an opportunity to recommit ourselves to the mission Christ has given us, to trust in the power of his Word and sacraments, and to rejoice in the privilege that God has given us to play a role in his saving work."

To read Hein's full report, titled "A demographic study of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod," visit wels.net/2017synodconvention and click on "Key convention documents." Look for additional details in the November WELS Connection. ☩

A growing Lutheran family

On Tuesday, the synod in convention had the joy of officially welcoming three Lutheran synods from around the world into our fellowship. All three synods were unanimously voted into fellowship with a standing ovation.

Representing the synods were Rev. Dr. Kebede Yigezu from the Lutheran Church of Ethiopia (LCE), Rev. Titus Tse from South Asian Lutheran Evangelical Mission (SALEM) in Hong

Kong, and two pastors from the East Asia Lutheran Synod.

After growing up in a Christian church in Ethiopia and having an opportunity to study at a Lutheran seminary in the U.S., Kebede knew he wanted to take the solid Bible-based doctrine back with him to Ethiopia. He founded the Lutheran Church of Ethiopia in 2012 and, at the same time, added a seminary, the Maor Theological College, so that he can teach other Christian pastors, in addition to Lutheran pastors, the pure Word of God. Today, the Lutheran Church of Ethiopia has nearly 400 members and has already seen graduates from its seminary.

Kebede says the declaration of fellowship is a historic moment for the LCE. "It is by God's grace and we are very happy; it is meaningful for us because faithfulness to Scripture is a very important matter of life and death. Jesus says 'If you hold to my teaching . . .' So, faithfulness to what he says, what the Scriptures say from Genesis chapter 1 to the last chapter of Revelation, is very important. We are very happy because we know that WELS is faithful to the Scriptures and is a confessional Lutheran church."

The East Asia Lutheran Synod was established in February 2017. It was formed from five Lutheran groups and has 280 baptized members. The synod is just getting started but is already looking ahead to how it can expand and grow as well as begin international mission work.

One of the pastors said, "It's a numerous number of people who come to convention, and it's a blessing to see there's a huge church group at our back to support our church even though we are very far away and in a very different situation."

Rev. Titus Tse from the South Asian Lutheran Evangelical Mission in Hong Kong attended the convention to participate in the declaration of fellowship on behalf of SALEM. Founded in 1977, SALEM has 10 congregations and six pastors. The synod's history is tied closely to Asia Lutheran Seminary, the WELS ministerial training school located in Hong Kong.

Tse said, "We recognize that it's important that we're keeping the faith, and we can share with future generations the importance of keeping the faith because of this relationship with WELS, a church that shares our faith."

To learn more about all of WELS' sister synods around the world, visit celc.info. ☩

Delegates view new Luther film

Delegates enjoyed a special screening of the popular Martin Luther film, *A Return to Grace: Luther's Life and Legacy*, Wednesday evening.

Produced by Boettcher+Trinklein Television Inc., this full-length film explores the life of Martin Luther and his quest for truth, bringing to life the 16th-century events of the Reformation. Funding from Thrivent Financial made it possible to produce the movie. Since February, at least one thousand WELS churches and others around the country have hosted local screenings of the film, making *A Return to Grace* the #1 movie distributed by Tugg in 2017.