


Military Services. Civilians moving to England can contact Rev. Conifer Berg to notify the ministry team of their desire for Word and sacrament. 

## Ministry retreats offer opportunities for growth

About 160 pastors and wives met in San Antonio, Texas, April 3–5, for the annual Celebration of Ministry retreats. Hosted by Grow in Grace, the institute for continuing education at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis., these retreats offer Bible study, workshops, and plenty of opportunities to interact with fellow classmates for pastors celebrating 3, 10, 25, and 35 years since graduating from the seminary.

That interaction is a pivotal part of the retreats. “No one can understand the joys and challenges of ministry and be able to encourage you in that ministry as someone else experiencing the same things,” says Rev. Brad Wordell, director of Grow in Grace.


Rev. Michael and Rachel Hartman, who serve in London and the United Kingdom, attended the retreat as part of the 25-year celebration group. “I very much appreciated the Bible studies directed toward the ministry milestone we were celebrating,” says Rachel. “It was a neat chance to reflect on the past and look to the future, remembering God’s promises and the confidence he gives us in our daily lives to keep moving forward.”

Outside of opening and closing worship, the groups met separately, concentrating on topics that affect them

at that particular time in their ministry. This year, for the first time, they also all gathered for cross-generational, round-table discussions. “The younger generation could hear how the Lord has blessed those who have been in ministry a long time, how he has done his saving work through them, and how he carried them through difficulties,” says Wordell. “Those who are older were also blessed to see the gifts and the zeal of the younger pastors and their wives and to have the peace of knowing that God is continuing to raise up faithful servants for our churches.”

These retreats are just one part of the continuing education offered through Grow in Grace. The institute also provides a formal continuing education program, resources such as articles and newsletters, and a mentoring program for new seminary graduates. “God’s Word doesn’t change, but the world that we live in changes and how ministry gets done changes,” says Wordell. “We want pastors who are continuing to learn and to grow.”

The retreats offer that opportunity, along with a chance to unplug and reflect. “You can see it on their faces that this is a blessing to them,” says Wordell. “It’s an uplifting retreat that sends pastors and their wives back to their congregations with a renewed zeal to do what God has called them to do.”

Learn more about Grow in Grace at [wisluthsem.org/grow-in-grace](http://wisluthsem.org/grow-in-grace). 

# TOGETHER



April 16, 2024

## COP April 2024 meeting summary

The WELS Conference of Presidents (COP) met in April for its spring meeting. Among the items discussed or decided were:


- The COP reviewed the vacancy situation for pastors and teachers. The number of vacancies continues to rise gradually. Assignment days in May will help relieve the situation somewhat, but the problem will continue for the foreseeable future. The COP received a progress report from the Ministerial Recruitment Task Force, which will be making proposals to address the need for more workers.
- The New Teacher Induction Program and the Pastor Partners Program provide mentoring to newly assigned teachers and pastors for the first three years of their service. The cost to congregations has been \$1,000 per year and has not been increased for some time. To more adequately cover the cost of the program, the COP determined that, starting in 2025, the cost will be \$1,500 per worker.
- The COP was informed that a more thorough process for vetting non-MLC-trained teachers has been developed. The process will include evaluations of professional competency, background checks, pastoral recommendations, and district president interviews. Final details are still being determined.
- The COP reviewed the current calling process and made no changes to the current guidelines. The COP will continue discussing this issue at future meetings.
- The COP received a report from the committee planning the synod’s 175th anniversary celebration in 2025. The committee has produced a pictorial history of the synod and updated the existing book on the synod’s history. It is working on developing special video presentations and providing worship and Bible study resources for a synodwide celebration of the anniversary in the fall of 2025.
- The COP was pleased to learn that 96.7 percent of WELS congregations submitted their statistics for 2023 and 99.1 percent submitted Congregation Mission Offering subscriptions for 2024. The COP is grateful for this high level of participation.
- The COP issued the following divine calls:
  - ▶ Melanie Giddings was called to serve full time as the coordinator of the new synod K-12 religion curriculum.
  - ▶ Ryan Busman was called to serve as a Christian giving counselor for the Western Wisconsin District.
  - ▶ Nathan Cordes was called to serve as a Christian giving counselor for the south Minnesota District, the Nebraska District, and the Dakota-Montana District
- The COP will continue to monitor the issue of congregations that are discussing merging or closing. As a part of the COP’s desire that these decisions are



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made in an orderly and legal way, the COP is updating the comprehensive guidelines that can help congregations in this process.

- The COP continued its work on the pastoral brief on the doctrine of the roles and men and women. The brief will be released and distributed as soon as it is completed. Similarly, the COP received an update from the committee addressing justice and critical theories.
- The COP discussed a proposal to make some changes to the procedure for nominating and electing synod officers. A final proposal is expected to be discussed at district conventions this summer.

Serving with you in Christ,  
WELS President Mark Schroeder 

## Gospel Hands helps for worship

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A new website called Gospel Hands is now available from WELS Special Ministries. This resource, produced by the Mission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (MDHH), aims to share the gospel and better tell the message of Jesus to all who are deaf.

Gospel Hands provides videos of interpreters demonstrating the signs for more than 700 religious words and concepts, including a contextual sentence and a Scripture reference, if applicable. In addition, each sign is demonstrated from the front and the side. The signs are listed alphabetically and searchable by category.


Gospel Hands is the culmination of a three-year project by the committee. Back in 2003, the MDHH produced a book of religious signs for interpreters called *Sign to the Lord a New Song*. But knowing that a printed book of religious signs is no longer practical, the MDHH utilized the blessings of technology to record sign videos for this new website. Committee members collaborated on choosing the signs and context for each word.

Mrs. Verna Weigand, a religious sign language interpreter and a long-standing member of the MDHH com-

mittee, has been involved in Gospel Hands from the beginning. She is thrilled about this new resource and also appreciates that churches have become more open to using interpreters in worship and providing other resources like words on AV screens, hearing loops, and printed sermons for those with hearing loss. "It's really important that [those with hearing loss] know congregations will assist them and not just say, 'We don't offer that here,'" she says.

Weigand, a member at Mt. Calvary, Waukesha, Wis., notes that Gospel Hands is growing as new resources, like videos of signed worship services, continue to be added. Mrs. Susan Willems, a member at Christ the Lord, Brookfield, Wis., is thrilled about this expanding resource because it helps her and her family members share their faith with her one-year-old nephew, Parker, who has been deaf from birth. "We learn sign language so we can include Parker in every aspect of our family," she says. "You also never know when the opportunity will present itself to share Jesus with someone who is deaf or hard of hearing."

Because it's estimated that 85 to 90 percent of those with hearing loss don't attend church because of a lack of religious resources for them, Rev. Joel Gaertner, director of the Commission on Special Ministries, knows what a valuable faith resource Gospel Hands is. "The work to put together an online religious sign language dictionary demonstrates the dedication of the members of the MDHH committee to provide as many resources as possible to help share the gospel with the deaf and hard of hearing community," he says. "It's wonderful to see how they are using technology to make this website possible."

Learn more at [gospelhands.net](http://gospelhands.net) and find additional resources at [wels.net/deaf-and-hard-of-hearing](http://wels.net/deaf-and-hard-of-hearing). 

## A ministry partnership in Europe

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How can WELS best reach and serve all its members across Europe? This question brought together a cohort in Munich, Germany, during the first week of April.

Rev. Joel Gaertner, director of WELS Commission on Special Ministries, and Mr. Paul Wolgramm, Military Services Committee chairman, traveled to Germany for two weeks over Easter where they visited different places where the chaplaincy does ministry; attended the annual European Easter retreat held by the Military Services European chaplaincy; and also met with Rev. Luke Wolgramm, Europe team leader; his wife, Jennifer, Europe team integrator; Rev. Rob Weiss, European civilian chaplain; and his wife, Rachel.

The WELS European Chaplaincy has been serving WELS military mem-

bers and civilians across Europe for more than 50 years as a ministry of WELS Military Services, which is part of WELS Special Ministries. More recently, a new opportunity for mission work has emerged. In recent years, many members from WELS' sister churches around the world have been moving to the U.K. In response to this opportunity, WELS World Missions planted a new mission field in the U.K. in 2022. Rev. Michael Hartman was called and Rev. Conifer Berg was assigned to begin serving the group already gathering in London, connect with contacts from other sister church bodies, and launch outreach efforts.

The representatives from WELS Military Services met with Luke Wolgramm, the team leader for World Missions in Europe, to discuss how the group of WELS pastors working abroad can best serve all WELS members living across Europe.

Gaertner says, "The biggest thing is making sure that we provide the opportunity to serve as many people as possible in Europe and in England with Word and sacrament."

The group plans on meeting regularly to evaluate how it is working together. Gaertner says, "There's going to be communication between Conifer Berg on the London team and Rob Weiss, the European chaplain, when we find out there's a military person there. They will determine how the spiritual needs of that member can best be met. The big point is we will continue to serve them, but it will be based on where they're located in England—whether the Europe team serves them or is it better for the European chaplain to serve them."

Members in the military and their families are encouraged to go to [wels.net/refer](http://wels.net/refer) to be put in contact with WELS