

Easley, S.C.: Since 2016, Abiding Peace, Simpsonville, S.C., has been exploring the option of starting a second site in the greater Greenville area that includes Easley and Powdersville. Abiding Peace is currently offering worship and Bible study and getting involved in community events from a leased home base in Easley as it evaluates where a future, permanent site might be established with a new missionary.

Williston, N.D.: The core group in Williston has been gathering for 15 years, now under the name Lamb of God Lutheran Church. It rents a full-time ministry center where members conduct outreach and worship online with the WELS church in Bismarck, N.D. Members look forward to reaching out with the gospel with a full-time missionary at the helm.

The Board for Home Missions is also financially supporting ministry enhancements for Calvary, Dallas, Texas; Crossroads, Chicago, Ill. (re-start); Faith, Prior Lake, Minn.; Good Shepherd, Plymouth, Wis.; Northdale, Tampa, Fla.; St. Marcus, Milwaukee, Wis.; and St. Paul, Calgary, Alberta, Canada.

Learn more about these new missions and ministry enhancements at wels100in10.net. 

TOGETHER



May 7, 2024

WELS Synodical Council spring 2024 meeting

The Synodical Council (SC) held its spring meeting on April 26-27.

In my president's report, I noted that:

- Synod finances remain strong, with another year of record Congregation Mission Offerings and special fund balances all at a healthy status.
- The newly established Capital Projects Fund will provide planning support for needed building projects at the synodical schools and will potentially provide support for servicing capital debt if needed.
- Two missionaries have been deployed from Thailand to Australia. WELS World Missions will also be working with a new Chinese congregation in New Zealand.
- A special committee is working on plans to celebrate the synod's 175th anniversary in 2025.

Rev. Paul Prange provided an update on the work being done by the Ministry Recruitment Task Force. The task force will provide detailed information to the district conventions this summer.

Rev. Jonathan Hein presented an overview of the draft of the synod's new long-range plan, which is entitled "Christ through us."

Several new office spaces will be created in the WELS Center for Mission and Ministry, providing offices to administrators who need them.

The Administration Committee received reports from the synod's subsidiaries (WELS Foundation, WELS Church Extension Fund, WELS Investment Funds, Northwestern Publishing House) and from various synodical departments (Human Resources, Technology, Communications, Ministry of Christian Giving, WELS Benefit Plans). Appointments to various board positions were approved by the SC.

The committee also received a report from the Compensation Review Committee, which reminds congregations that paying "synod code" includes full health insurance premiums, cash housing allowance, cost of living increases, and reimbursement for the self-employment aspect of social security. Before making any major changes to the compensation code, the committee will survey congregations and other calling bodies to determine how actual compensation compares to the synod code.

The SC reviewed the summary of FY24 financial results, noting that total unrestricted support is trending better than planned, while overall expenses are trending lower than planned through the first nine months of FY24. FY24 special funds reserves through March 2024 increased to \$92.7 million, a \$10

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million increase from FY23, and a \$50.0 million increase in the last five years, more than doubling special funds reserve balances.

The SC approved the support forecast for the next biennium (an estimate of the financial support that will be available to fund the synod's ministry). It's estimated that synod support levels will be \$35.3 million in FY26 and \$36.4 million in FY27. The SC also approved the initial planning assumptions, including:

- Congregation Mission Offerings projected to increase 0.5% each year,
- called and non-called worker wages to increase on average 3.5% in FY26 and 2.0% in FY27,
- healthcare expenses to increase 10% each year,
- no increase in retirement plan expenses in either year, and
- operational/program expenses and school subsidy to increase 3.0% each year.

The SC discussed the continued progress that the WELS CFO, Mr. Kyle Egan, has been making in helping to improve the process for planning, organizing, and prioritizing capital projects for the synod. His office has started to have conversations with firms that could assist with comprehensive site-planning across all synod locations and will work with the SC Executive Committee with the goal of getting that process started in the next few months.

The SC received reports from Home Missions, World Missions, Ministerial Education, WELS Christian Aid and Relief, and Congregational Services.

Mr. Steve Hansen, Mr. Kenneth Gosch, and Mr. Thomas Schermerhorn all completed 12 years of faithful service on the SC. We thank them for all that they have done.

Serving with you in Christ,
WELS President Mark Schroeder 

WELS Prison Ministry reaching more inmates

WELS Prison Ministry has had an active and robust ministry by mail since 1993, relying on volunteers to facilitate mailing, encourage inmates with the gospel, and correct the tests that accompany the printed Bible lesson booklets distributed to inmates.

However, as Mr. Dave Hochmuth, Prison Ministry administrator, explains, sending booklets by mail to inmates has been getting increasingly difficult as prisons and jails are on higher alert for more sophisticated contraband, often drugs, sent to inmates hidden in

physical mail. So, WELS Prison Ministry had to pivot how it distributes Bible lessons to the incarcerated.

Hochmuth says, "Last fall we contracted with a nonprofit organization called Edovo.com. They have created a learning management system like the ones schools use for distance learning, except theirs is for inmates. We have worked since then to develop online courses based on our Bible correspondence course booklets. We made three courses available on March 15 in an initial offering to work out

the processes needed for handling this new opportunity. In the approximately seven weeks since the courses went live, we've been averaging nearly 300 digital tests per week generated by the inmates taking these three courses."

This is about the same volume of tests Prison Ministry handled a decade ago when distribution by mail was near or at its peak. Hochmuth estimates Prison Ministry has gained between 500 and 1,000 new students since the launch of Edovo in March.

With the increase in inmates actively learning about their Savior, Prison Ministry has an immediate need for an additional 100 volunteers to serve as test correctors. In the near term, the test responses will be printed out and mailed to correctors, who will then correct the printed copy, which then will be returned to the inmates. This maintains a system where inmates are, at some level, still interacting with another person demonstrating Christ's love to others.

If you are interested in volunteering, e-mail prisonministry@wels.net or call 507-354-3130 (M-F 8:30 a.m.-11:30 a.m. Central).

If you know someone in jail or prison, use wels.net/refer to connect them with WELS Prison Ministry. 

WELS Home Missions approves new missions and enhancements

On April 18–19, WELS Board for Home Missions approved 12 new missions and enhancements for the synodwide 100 Missions in 10 Years initiative.

"We're seeing a large increase in interest rates, and land, building, and health insurance costs that impact budgets for our current and future missions," says Rev. Mark Gabb, Home Missions administrator. "As we considered new ministry requests this year, we worked hard to find balance between trusting God to do immeasurably more than we can imagine and not putting God to the test as we aim to wisely manage the dollars God's people have given to WELS and Home Missions. Our goal remains the same: to aggressively go after the lost with the gospel."

In the end, Home Missions approved five new starts and seven enhancements with the possibility of approving more in September. The five new mission starts include:

Bend, Ore.: Bend was identified in 2020 as the second-fastest growing city in the U.S. A core group of eight families has been gathering twice a month for Bible study and planning as it plants a church in an area where 62 percent of people are not involved with any religious community.

Cedar Lake, Ind.: Members from Trinity and Zion in Crete, Ill., have formed a core group to plant a new mission in nearby Cedar Lake. This area of northwest Indiana is growing rapidly as Chicago commuters look for cheaper alternatives to living in Illinois.

Conway, Ark. (pictured): Conway is a growing college town in the northwest of Little Rock with no WELS presence. A group of 19 WELS members has been gathering at a local hotel on Sundays for worship and Bible study with a part-time retired pastor and getting involved in the community as it prepares to launch a brand-new church.