


Each year, the OWLS designates its convention offerings to support the WELS European civilian chaplaincy. This year, the OWLS again presented the chaplaincy with a check for \$50,000. Convention offerings and proceeds from the silent auction, which raised a record \$2,675, were directed for next year's gift to the work of the chaplaincy. During his video call, Weiss expressed his gratitude: "Thank you to all of you in OWLS for the support you give the European chaplaincy," he said. "It puts a pastor with his people. Thank you also from all those over here who receive Word and sacrament because of what you do."

John Paulsen, OWLS executive director, says, "This year's convention seemed to strike a chord with everyone. Even first-time convention goers were impressed by the quality of the presentations and the fellowship of the group. We all get to grow in faith together!" Paulsen encourages any congregation with a seniors' ministry to look into the OWLS program because it offers meaningful ways for seniors to gather and serve.

The 2024 OWLS convention will be held Oct. 14–17 at the Omaha Marriott, Omaha, Neb. The convention is open to all seniors 55 and older in WELS and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, regardless of OWLS membership.

Learn more about the OWLS at [wels.net/owls](https://wels.net/owls). 

## Two announcements from WELS Benefit Plans

### WELS Shepherd Plan

Administrative costs for the WELS Shepherd Plan, the retirement savings program for WELS called workers and employees, have decreased by 9.8 percent, effective Oct. 1, 2023. The new annualized administrative cost will be 37 basis points (37/100ths of one percent) per year.

### WELS VEBA

The WELS VEBA Commission is offering a limited open enrollment for the WELS VEBA Group Health Care Plan for the 2024 plan year. The limited open enrollment is available to eligible workers at sponsoring organizations with at least one active worker enrolled in medical benefits under the WELS VEBA health plan. Enrollment opened Nov. 1, 2023, and will run through Nov. 30, 2023.

Eligible participants can enroll in WELS VEBA or change current WELS VEBA coverage by going to the WELS Benefits Service Center website at [www.wels.bswift.com](http://www.wels.bswift.com).

The WELS VEBA Commission has also announced that the 2024 premium rates for WELS VEBA medical benefits will increase by 11 percent. This increase is necessary to ensure that the plan maintains adequate long-term reserves, particularly given inflation-related increases in the cost of health care. WELS VEBA health plan rates for 2024 are available at [welsbpo.net](https://welsbpo.net).

# TOGETHER



November 7, 2023

## November 2023 meeting of the Synodical Council

The Synodical Council (SC) held its fall meeting last week. Here are some of the highlights:

### President's report

In my regular report to the SC, I shared the following information:

- The Conference of Presidents has begun to carry out a resolution by the synod convention to prepare a pastoral brief on "critical theory." This brief will be intended to provide called workers and members information that they will need to understand and to deal with an important issue affecting our churches and members.
- A task force has been formed to carry out a synod resolution calling for a wide-ranging effort to address the shortage of called workers.
- Two gifts (of approximately \$800,000 and \$500,000) have been given to the synod by congregations that have decided to close. The purpose of these gifts is to provide support for ongoing and expanded mission work.
- Northwestern Publishing House will use a special grant from the Schwan Foundation to enable the inclusion of the Evangelical Heritage Version, the English Standard Version, and the Christian Standard Bible translations in the Service Builder software for the new hymnal. The new hymnal has

been adopted by approximately 75 percent of WELS congregations.

- A newly appointed committee has begun planning for the celebration of the synod's 175th anniversary in 2025.

### Updates

The SC received detailed updates from the areas of ministry, the synod's subsidiaries, and the various departments of the synod. Highlights include:

- The Board for World Missions is considering new mission efforts in several foreign mission fields, including Senegal and Australia. God continues to bless the work around the world.
- The Board for Home Missions has approved the establishment of 10 new home missions and 10 mission enhancements this year, in keeping with the "100 missions in 10 years" initiative.
- Reports from WELS Investment Funds, WELS Foundation, WELS Church Extension Fund, Benefit Plans, and Northwestern Publishing House all indicate a solid financial condition for all these subsidiaries.
- WELS Communication Services has produced a video, "Doing More Together," that provides guidance and encouragement to congregations as they establish their 2024 Congregation Mission Offering (CMO) subscriptions.



To sign up for the e-mail version, visit [wels.net/together](https://wels.net/together).

- WELS Technology continues to focus on ensuring security and privacy in the IT systems at the WELS Center for Mission and Ministry and at the synodical schools. Video surveillance cameras are being installed at the WELS Center for Mission and Ministry in keeping with a recommendation from a recent security audit.
- The Ministry of Christian Giving reported that 2023 Congregation Mission Offerings through October are slightly higher than last year and are ahead of projections. Gifts of \$521,000 have been received for the Competency-Based Education program at Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn., This program provides an alternative pathway to the teaching ministry for WELS second-career adults who are unable to move to New Ulm for a traditional on-campus program. The “100 missions in 10 years” initiative has received \$2.66 million in gifts.
- Chief Financial Officer Kyle Egan reported that the accounting firm of Baker Tilly has completed the audit of the June 30, 2023, financial statements and has issued an unmodified opinion (the best that can be received). With that information, the SC approved the June 30, 2023, Consolidated Financial Statements.
- Egan also reported that the first quarter financial results are in line with planned levels for both revenues and expenditures. WELS remains in a strong and stable financial position.
- Over 800 WELS congregations, schools, and affiliated organizations are part of the WELS Group Property and Casualty Program


from Church Mutual. Because of their efforts to focus on risk management and loss control, the WELS group has again qualified for a safety dividend totaling just under \$200,000 for calendar year 2021 premiums. Participating organizations can expect to receive a dividend check in the mail for their portion of the dividend from Church Mutual by the end of calendar year 2023.

- WELS Christian Aid and Relief continues to provide assistance to congregations and sister church bodies in times of natural and man-made disasters. It is also eager to help individuals who are facing difficult financial or health situations.

### Decisions

- The SC approved a request by Luther Preparatory School, Watertown, Wis., to add a full-time employee to its recruitment staff. This position will not require additional synod operating support.
- The SC approved a request from Martin Luther College to proceed with the first phase of the build-out of additional music space in the unfinished basement of the chapel. The \$250,000 project will be funded with gifts received and designated for that purpose and will require no additional synod operating support.
- The SC transferred \$2 million from the Financial Stabilization Fund (FSF) to the synod’s Capital Projects Fund. The SC also amended the FSF policy to provide for an annual \$1 million to be transferred to the Capital Projects Fund. The Capital Projects Fund is intended to be a source of support for planned synodical building projects in the future.

- The SC approved the sale of an office condo in St. Paul, Minn., used by the WELS Mission for the Visually Impaired (MVI). Proceeds from the sale will be placed into the special funds of Congregational Services. MVI is planning on a partnership with a local congregation in the Twin Cities area for its ministry work.
- The SC continued to discuss the inflationary environment and called worker compensation and referred the matter to the Compensation Review Committee for continued review. The SC also reminds self-supporting congregations that each calling body has the flexibility and latitude to provide called workers with increases greater than the 2.5 percent increase included in the synod compensation matrix as they consider individual circumstances, local circumstances, or other relevant factors. In addition, the SC encourages congregations that are providing compensation less than the synod guidelines to strive to increase compensation to meet those guidelines.
- The SC determined that from now on it would meet in November and in April, with the ability to meet also in February if necessary.

Serving with you in Christ,  
WELS President Mark Schroeder 

## OWLS reflect on Christian vocation at annual conference

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The Organization of WELS Lutheran Seniors (OWLS) met in Stevens Point, Wis., Oct. 10–13, for its annual

conference. The conference revolved around the theme “Called to Be a Blessing,” which offered opportunities for the 130 attendees to reflect on their Christian vocation through worship, keynote presentations, and workshops.

The three keynotes reinforced that, even in retirement, God calls believers to be a blessing to those around them. In Wednesday’s opening keynote, Prof. Kenneth Cherney, Jr., from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis., gave an overview of Luther’s understanding of Christian vocation, in which God makes us channels through whom he pours out his blessings on others. Thursday’s keynote speaker, Rev. Jonathan Hein, coordinator of WELS Congregational Services, talked about the vital role WELS seniors will play in the next decade as WELS churches meet challenges stemming from the loss of younger members, reaching out to those who don’t see the need for church, and the need for more people to enter the gospel ministry. The final keynote on Friday featured Mr. Randy Breuer, a retired professional basketball player, speaking about being a Christian in the world of the NBA.

One of the highlights of this year’s convention was a special presentation and Q&A featuring Rev. Robert Weiss and his wife, Rachel, who joined the convention via video from Munich, Germany. Weiss was commissioned in August as the new WELS European civilian chaplain. The Weisses gave an update on their work throughout Europe as they serve both WELS military members and their families and civilians as well. Weiss encouraged those who have loved ones living and serving in Europe to fill out the form at [wels.net/refer](https://wels.net/refer) so he can connect with and serve them.