

**The History of WELS Kingdom Workers
and a Look Ahead to the Future**

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Every year during spring break Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) college students volunteer their time assisting WELS congregations around the country with their outreach programs. Throughout the year adult teams provide assistance to WELS mission congregations that are building new or adding to existing church and school buildings. Lay members from WELS congregations journey to home and world mission fields to assist missionaries with the daily operations of their mission field. These are just a few examples of how WELS lay member volunteers get involved in the work of proclaiming God's Word throughout the world. Without question these volunteers play an important role in the gospel ministry. Many of these important volunteer efforts are coordinated and supported financially through the work of WELS Kingdom Workers. Although they have been in existence for less than 20 years, WELS Kingdom Workers has worked to provide much needed manpower and financial support for hundreds of mission projects in the WELS.

In recent years the WELS has experienced difficulties in continuing to do this important mission work. Financial problems have put a strain on the WELS ability to continue the work of proclaiming the good news of our crucified and risen Savior. Budget constraints forced the WELS to recall a number of missionaries from their assigned mission fields. The ability to open new missions has also been greatly reduced. As a result of these financial difficulties the WELS has been forced to look for new ways to continue the gospel ministry. How will these issues affect the work of WELS Kingdom Workers in the future? Will they be able to find financing to continue the work they have done in the past, or will they be forced to cut back on their support of WELS Home and World Missions? Or will these challenging times create new opportunities for Kingdom Workers to serve the Lord? The purpose of this paper is to first review the history

of WELS Kingdom Workers. Then we will explore potential changes and opportunities for Kingdom Workers as a result of the changing situation in the WELS.

The history of WELS Kingdom Workers dates back to 1986. Robert Grebe and Jim Haag were two lay members serving on the WELS Board of World Missions. Both men saw that there were tremendous opportunities to do additional work in reaching out to the world with the gospel message. But they also realized that there was a definite need for additional financial and human resources to do this important work. Both men knew that there was a large untapped resource base among lay members in the WELS. The question was how to get lay members more involved in volunteering their time, talents, and treasures to support mission work both home and abroad. At a meeting of the WELS Board of World Missions, Grebe and Haag first began to talk about the idea of an organization to coordinate lay member involvement in mission work. After the meeting the two men began laying the foundation for such an organization. According to WELS Kingdom Workers National Executive Director David Timm, “Bob Grebe decided to network among the financially blessed people of the WELS along with Jim Haag. He did this pretty much everywhere and got this thing going.”¹

Grebe and Haag were not the only ones who saw the need for greater lay member involvement in the WELS. Getting the general membership more involved in the work of the Synod was a major focus when the 49th biennial convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran synod met in Watertown, Wisconsin in August of 1987. The convention theme *Equipping the Believers* showed that the WELS leadership came to the same conclusion as Grebe and Haag. It was clear that the WELS was not doing everything it could to utilize the many God-given gifts and talents of the Synod lay members. Greater efforts needed to be made to mobilize the lay members to aid in the work of carrying God’s Word into the world. Carl Mischke was the

¹ Interview with David Timm, December 7, 2005

President of the WELS at that time. During his address to the convention he stressed the importance of *Equipping the Believers*. He stated,

“Equipping the believers as disciples is the starting point, not as mere spectators, not as reluctant substitutes, but as willing, full-time participants eager to serve where the action is. They are dedicated, committed Christians who bear much fruit. It’s an equipping that takes place through the Word and only through the Word. May the presentations, discussions and resolutions of this convention heighten our resolve, by the Spirit’s power, to let the Word rule supreme in our hearts and lives.”²

One of the presentations the convention heard that year came from Bob Grebe. He presented the idea of the WELS Kingdom Workers and told the delegates about the work that had already been done for the proposed new organization. The convention delegates supported the idea and passed a resolution encouraging the establishment of an organization to mobilize lay members to assist in WELS mission work. The resolution noted the work already done by Grebe and Haag when it stated, “Laymen elected to the Board for World Missions have laid the groundwork for a proposed organization to channel increasing lay involvement and mission awareness at the grass roots level.”³ While the resolution noted that it was not the policy of the Synod to give official sanction to organizations within its membership it was agreed that, “There is a need to gather names in an orderly fashion and to develop an appropriate lay structure that will serve the Synod in its outreach mission; therefore be it resolved that the Synod encourages WELS Kingdom Workers to pursue its objective among laypersons of WELS congregations.”⁴

The first organizational gathering of the WELS Kingdom Workers was held in Muskego, Wisconsin in April of 1988. Bob Grebe became the first chairman of the National WKW Charter

² Proceedings of the Forty-Ninth Biennial Convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, Northwestern College, Watertown, Wisconsin, 1987, 25.

³ Proceedings of the Forty-Ninth Biennial Convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, Northwestern College, Watertown, Wisconsin, 1987, 54.

⁴ Proceedings of the Forty-Ninth Biennial Convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, Northwestern College, Watertown, Wisconsin, 1987, 55.

Board. David Timm noted that Grebe was the perfect man for the job, "Bob Grebe was kind of a maverick personality. If he planned on something, it was going to happen. He was a great starter. I believe that God provides people with special gifts and talents for special times and Bob Grebe was the right man to get Kingdom Workers started."⁵ Jim Haag also remained very involved in Kingdom Workers. He joined Grebe on the board as treasurer. Larry Marquardt, Lloyd Anderson, Homer Albrecht, Dr. Jerome Brooks, and Rev. Bill Bernhardt were the other board members.

In August of 1989 the new organization held its first biennial convention in Prairie du Chein, Wisconsin. At the convention the Articles of Incorporation were officially adopted. Later in 1989 an executive committee was appointed. Bob Grebe served as the president. Jim Haag also served on the committee along with Larry Marquardt, Gerald Davis, Dick Waldschmidt and Rev. Charles Found. These men all served on a volunteer basis. Pauline Jaeger also volunteered her time as the first staff person. The Kingdom Workers first office was located at Jordan Lutheran Grade School in West Allis.

Along with establishing the new organization, it was important to determine specifically what its purpose would be. Early in their history WELS Kingdom Workers members identified their statement of purpose and how they intended to accomplish that purpose.

"WELS Kingdom Workers exists for the purpose of assisting the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod mission divisions according to the Great Commission of our Lord Jesus Christ.

To accomplish this purpose WELS Kingdom Workers will endeavor, under God, to inform WELS members of the needs and opportunities that exist in home and world mission fields; to encourage WELS members to become personally involved in mission work; to facilitate and coordinate volunteer efforts in missions fields; to provide financial support for authorized, but yet unfounded, mission programs."⁶

⁵ Interview with David Timm December 7, 2005

⁶ WELS Kingdom Workers Web Site

This same purpose continued to be the focus of WELS Kingdom Workers throughout their history.

But the new organization was doing more than just holding meetings and identifying purpose statements. They wasted no time in getting involved in mission work. Soon after the April 1988 organizational meeting, WELS Kingdom Workers became involved in their first mission projects. The Board of World Missions wanted to find a lay couple to serve at the Lutheran Church of Central Africa's medical mission in Zambia. WELS Kingdom Workers agreed to fund the couple to fill this role. Herman and Lorraine Koester, a retired couple from Albuquerque, New Mexico were selected to fill the position. When they arrived in Africa in November of 1988 their work was supposed to be primarily doing maintenance projects. But their roles quickly expanded, especially after missionary Dan Jansen took a call back to the United States. After that Herman Koester found himself taking on numerous other tasks including teaching a confirmation class and leading devotions. Lorraine Koester took on directing the nationals employed at the mission. The Koesters served in Africa for two years before returning to the United States. Daryl and Nancy Lucke, who had previously worked among the Apache Indians on the East Fork Reservation, replaced them. WELS Kingdom Workers continues to fund a lay couple in Zambia right up to the present time.

Sending a lay couple to Zambia was not the only project Kingdom Workers became involved in during their early days. They also assisted in beginning outreach efforts in Milwaukee's inner city through Northside Lutheran Ministries. Kingdom Workers continues to provide assistance to Northside Lutheran Ministries. In 2005 they committed \$70,000 toward this outreach effort. They have assisted in funding a missionary, Mark Cares, to do outreach work

among the Mormons in Idaho. There is now an established congregation served by Pastor Cares and reaching out to the Mormons continues in this area.

With the success of early projects Kingdom Workers began getting requests for more lay volunteers. John Wiederhold, Administrator for WELS Kingdom Workers Christian Volunteer Corps told how the types of requests evolved over the years.

“For the most part all the work that came in was more construction related, to send someone out to fix the church or parsonage. And that’s pretty much what was asked of Kingdom Workers. They didn’t get involved in anything else. Then that kept growing and growing and right now I have very few handymen asked for, now they’re looking for teachers, business managers, guys with accounting skills, and medical people. Those are the requests that are coming in now, its getting more and more sophisticated.”⁷

WELS Kingdom Workers was definitely off to a good start. There were a growing number of opportunities to serve and many lay members who wanted to get involved. And so just two years after its first organizational meeting it became necessary for Kingdom Workers to name a full-time national executive director. In December of 1990, Mark Krueger was selected to fill that role. By the time Krueger began work in his new position there were already about 1200 members in Kingdom Workers and organizations in all 12 of the synod's districts. During Krueger’s time in office, Kingdom Workers relocated to a new national office in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin.

Another important event in the history of WELS Kingdom Workers also occurred in 1990. Marvin Schwan was a major financial supporter of WELS Kingdom Workers in its early days. In 1990, the Schwan Foundation provided donations that allowed Kingdom Workers to establish a matching fund program. The Schwan Foundation also agreed to provide funding for Kingdom Workers’ administrative costs. John Wiederhold talked about the importance of these

⁷ Interview with John Wiederhold November 8, 2005

programs. "The cost of operating our office is all covered by the Schwan Foundation. This means that when a donation comes in to Kingdom Workers, 100% of it went to the mission teams that we are asked to support. And a copy was sent to the Schwan Foundation and they match the donation."⁸ This generous donation from the Schwan Foundation increased the amount of work that could be done through every individual donation that came into Kingdom Workers. This program continues to be an important part of the work Kingdom Workers does to this day.

Mark Krueger served faithfully as National Executive Director over the next two years. In 1992, he resigned from his position to pursue other career opportunities. Later that same year David Timm was selected to fill the position. Timm has continued to serve in that same capacity ever since. One of the areas the Kingdom Workers Board of Directors instructed him to focus on was the development of more local Kingdom Worker chapters. Local Kingdom Worker chapters are subsidiary organizations of the national organization. Local chapters focus on promoting additional lay involvement in the immediate area, encourage financial support for projects, and take the leadership role in local mission outreach projects. As he focused on that work, David Timm noted some important lessons he learned.

"I quickly learned there were certain ingredients in order to establish a Kingdom Workers chapter. One is a passion to do mission work, and the second ingredient is strong local lay leadership. If you don't have both of those things it won't go and we have had some chapters fail. So I became much more selective in establishing chapters and looking for these ingredients. We can't from Milwaukee administer all the details of every chapter. We need the local lay leaders to run their programs."⁹

The number of local chapters continues to grow. In 2005, WELS Kingdom Workers added three new local chapters bringing their total to 18 local chapters nationwide.

⁸ Interview with John Wiederhold November 8, 2005

⁹ Interview with David Timm December 7, 2005

In 1993 WELS Kingdom Workers began a new division to provide greater opportunities for people to share their talents and skills with others in the WELS. This new division became known as the Christian Volunteer Corps. The Christian Volunteer Corps was originally set up to provide assistance in three areas. The first area was to provide lay volunteers to serve in mission fields. The second area was to provide a central talent bank available to all churches and agencies in the WELS. The third area was the Builders For Christ program. Dale Mueller was named the first director of Christian Volunteer Corps. He remained in that position until 1996 when John Wiederhold was named the new director. Wiederhold continues to serve in that position today. Today Christian Volunteer Corps continues to work in cooperation with the WELS Board of World Missions. They strive to provide men and women of all ages who use their talents to provide support to called workers in the daily operations of missions. Today Christian Volunteer Corps are serving in places like Taiwan, Thailand, Russia, Brazil, Malawi, Zambia, and the list goes on and on.

Christian Volunteer Corps also branched out to provide volunteers to serve in world mission fields of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS). According to John Wiederhold this cooperation with the ELS has been a benefit to both the ELS and Kingdom Workers, "We do some work for the ELS now. I found people for Korea and the Czech Republic, those two fields have been big. We have people who want to help there so let them go to the ELS. The ELS has reciprocated and given us some very good people."¹⁰

When Dale Mueller stepped down as director of the Christian Volunteer Corps he became the full-time director of Builders For Christ, a new division of WELS Kingdom Workers. The Builders For Christ division grew so rapidly that it quickly became its own separate division in 1996. Originally Builders for Christ was a program of the Board of Home

¹⁰ Interview with John Wiederhold November 8, 2005

Missions. For years the Home Missions Board encouraged mission congregations to reduce construction costs by using volunteer labor. But an idea for greater lay member involvement in this area came from outside the WELS. The Board for Home Missions told the story in the 1990 Report to the Twelve Districts.

“The BHM has been aware for some time of a Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod program called Laborers for Christ. Under that program the LCMS proposed to keep their building construction costs at a minimum and to make use of the talented craftsmen in their church body. The BHM was not prepared to proceed further than monitoring the progress of that program until the organization of WELS Lutheran Seniors (OWLS) provided impetus some three years ago. When the OWLS approached the BHM with a proposed WELS outline of the program, a task force was appointed by the BHM to make a complete feasibility study.”¹¹

The feasibility study resulted in the approval of a two-year pilot project. Armed with a \$15,000 grant to handle start-up costs, Builders for Christ was born. Pastor Marvin Radtke, who was preparing to retire from active public ministry, agreed to serve as the first administrator for the new program. Radtke continued to serve in that capacity until Builders For Christ became a part of WELS Kingdom Workers. Dale Mueller continues to serve as director at the present time.

Like the Christian Volunteer Corp, the Builders For Christ division was an immediate success. The first project for Builders For Christ was in Hayward, Wisconsin. Volunteers constructed a 2300 hundred square foot worship facility for the congregation there. Utilizing Builders For Christ volunteers provided a big cost savings. The original cost estimates for the church building in Hayward were about \$150,000. Under the Builders For Christ program the congregation needed only about \$99,000. A short time later they built an even larger worship facility at Elk River, Minnesota. Builders For Christ officially became a part of WELS Kingdom Workers in January of 1994. After these early successes other WELS congregations began to call on Builders For Christ for assistance. During its history Builders for Christ has built over 25

¹¹ Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod Report to the Twelve Districts, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1990, 80.

worship facilities in the United States and has also done work in several foreign countries as well. Today Builders for Christ has a membership of about 350 members in 17 states.

Another important division of WELS Kingdom Workers is Faith In Action. This division works to provide lay people to assist congregations with outreach efforts throughout the United States. This division began when the Travel Canvass Witness program was moved from the WELS Board of Home Missions to WELS Kingdom Workers in 1997. Travel Canvass Witness is a program that enlists the aid of college students to help WELS congregations around the country with a variety of projects. When Kingdom Workers inherited the Travel Canvass Witness program they immediately saw the potential to expand it to allow even more people to get involved. David Timm explained, "Travel Canvass Witness came to us in 1997. And we said if we are going to do Travel Canvass Witness why would we limit it to college students only? So we expanded the program and it became Faith in Action."¹² Faith in Action is made up of three programs. These are Travel Canvass Witness, Youth in Service, and Member Ministry Assistance. Youth in Service provides many opportunities for teens to assist congregations with outreach efforts. Travel Canvass Witness remained focused on enlisting the aid of college students from campus ministry programs and synodical schools. They continue to assist congregations in various outreach projects. Member Ministry Assistance is set up to provide adult WELS members with the opportunity to share in outreach work. Pastor Richard Warnecke was called as administrator for Faith in Action in 1998. He continues to serve in that capacity.

Through the years WELS Kingdom Workers continued to provide an increasing amount of assistance to home and world mission fields. David Timm noted, "Our history has been one of steady growth and that's reflected in our contribution history. We have a grid that shows our contributions between 1993 and 2005 and it shows one increment of growth upon another each

¹² Interview with David Timm December 7, 2005

year.”¹³ Those financial contributions have grown to the point where they committed over 1.4 million dollars to over 30 WELS mission projects in North America and throughout the world in 2005. That growth is also reflected in the local WELS Kingdom Worker chapters around the country. The current 18 local chapters provide much needed support to local mission projects. Currently there are over 2,000 lay volunteers are in involved in 65 local and 22 national projects. Work is underway to form even more local chapters. Some could be in place by as early as 2006.

So where does WELS Kingdom Workers go from here? Certainly its goals and purpose remain unchanged from the time it was first organized. But recent financial issues within the WELS have forced reductions in some mission fields and have reduced the Synod’s ability to open new mission fields home and abroad. This is obviously a great concern for Kingdom Workers because they depend on these mission fields as a place to send volunteers. But even though there are no new mission fields opening on the Synod level at this time, other opportunities may still be opening up for Kingdom Workers. Some WELS congregations began to take on a greater role in doing mission work in their own area. Could these efforts by local congregations result in a greater need for WELS Kingdom Workers volunteers? David Timm felt this could lead to some opportunities, “I would say yes but I think this is such a new concept that is still in its infancy. But I expect that it will be opportunities for Kingdom Workers especially on the chapter level with local people in the community.”¹⁴

And the doors may be opening for WELS Kingdom Workers to become involved in other areas of ministry as well. One of these openings is in the area of disaster relief. In 2005 Hurricane Katrina devastated the city of New Orleans and surrounding areas. There was a huge response nationwide with offers of assistance. This also created an opportunity for WELS

¹³ Interview with David Timm December 7, 2005

¹⁴ Interview with David Timm December 7, 2005

Kingdom Workers to assist. John Wiederhold explained, “You look at how many people came to us at Katrina. When people see something they respond quickly. They’re doing it out of God’s love. Not only did the money come in and that went over to the Synod, but also people called in. We had over 700 people offer us either physical help or giving a place to stay. We had 200 offers for homes.”¹⁵

Another example of disaster relief assistance occurred in Grenada. Hurricane Ivan devastated the island. Many people were left without homes. A joint effort of Faith in Action and Builders for Christ provided volunteers and WELS Committee on Relief provided funding to go in and help rebuild homes. This also led to increased opportunities to share God’s Word. John Wiederhold told the story, “Jim Radloff was the only missionary there. He had 30 people in his church. This last January a number of teams went down to build homes for the people. They went in and rebuilt them and then encouraged those people to come and help others. By bringing that help to them Jim Radloff went from 30 in church to 130.”¹⁶ Even in the face of disaster the Lord opened doors to proclaim the saving message of Christ crucified.

David Timm also saw potential for Kingdom Workers to provide assistance in other areas as well, “There may be other divisions where we can expand. We’ve had just the very rudimentary mini-conversations with Special Ministries, just exploratory brainstorming.”¹⁷ Special Ministries reaches out to people with special needs and their families. Timm noted that these conversations with special ministries might lead to new opportunities for WELS Kingdom Workers to assist in the future.

But Kingdom Workers will not simply jump into new areas. David Timm noted that one thing that hasn’t changed is the source of their projects. “All of our projects come from Home

¹⁵ Interview with John Wiederhold November 8, 2005

¹⁶ Interview with John Wiederhold November 8, 2005

¹⁷ Interview with David Timm December 7, 2005

Missions and World Missions. We take our projects through them and when we make a distribution of funds we don't send it to the lay workers and we don't send it to the mission field, we send it to Home Missions and World Missions and they make the distribution. That way they are always in the loop. We have great respect for them and we have good working relations with them."¹⁸ Those good working relations were developed over years of working together with and building trust with the Board of Home Missions and the Board of World Missions.

WELS Kingdom Workers has expanded into many areas of ministry since they began less than 20 years ago. What began as the brainchild of Bob Grebe and Jim Haag has grown into an organization of thousands of volunteers. But no matter how much WELS Kingdom Workers has grown, their mission remains to assist WELS mission divisions in carrying out the Great Commission of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus told his disciples in Matthew 28:19, "Go and make disciples of all nations." WELS Kingdom Workers continues to work with the WELS Board of Home Missions and the WELS Board of World Missions to carry out the Lord's command by helping to provide financial resources and lay member volunteers. That has been their focus since their formation and it continues to be their focus today.

¹⁸ Interview with David Timm December 7, 2005

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