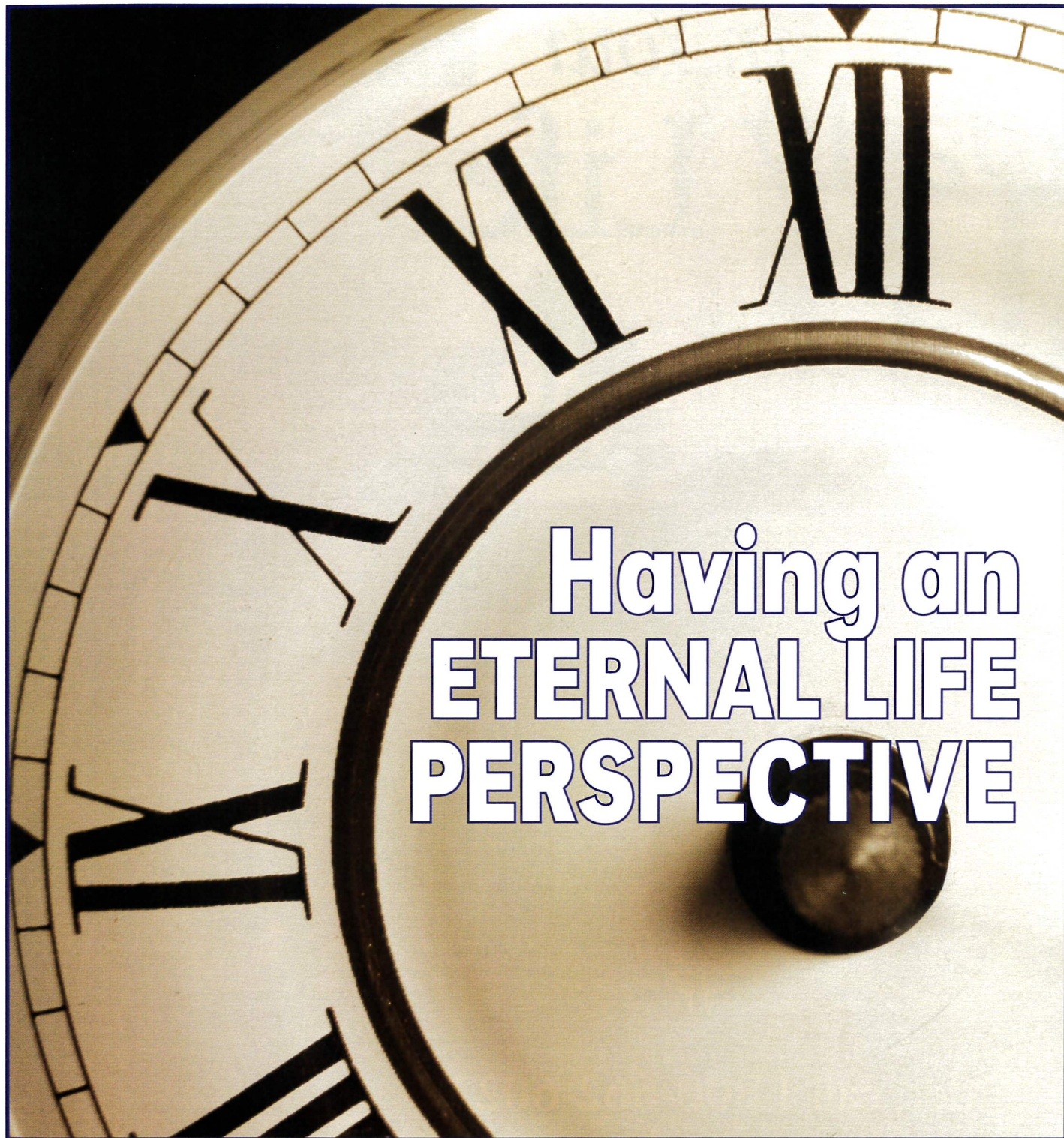


NOVEMBER 2006

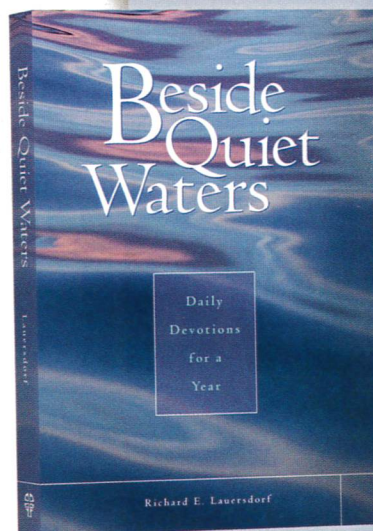
Forward in Christ

God's wisdom, WELS' witness



Having an
ETERNAL LIFE
PERSPECTIVE

Keep Jesus in Your Daily Life



When life's daily storms threaten to overwhelm you, the Lord promises to lead you through his Word to find peace

Beside Quiet Waters. In his second daily devotional, author Richard Lauersdorf has written 366 short meditations and prayers to encourage you to take your cares to Jesus every day.

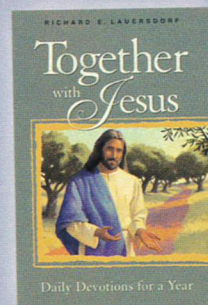
Beside Quiet Waters Daily Devotions for a Year

by Richard E. Lauersdorf
Paper cover. 370 pages.

LU06N0735
\$16.99



ALSO AVAILABLE



Together with Jesus


Daily Devotions for a Year

by Richard E. Lauersdorf
Paper cover. 370 pages.

LU06N0733
\$16.99

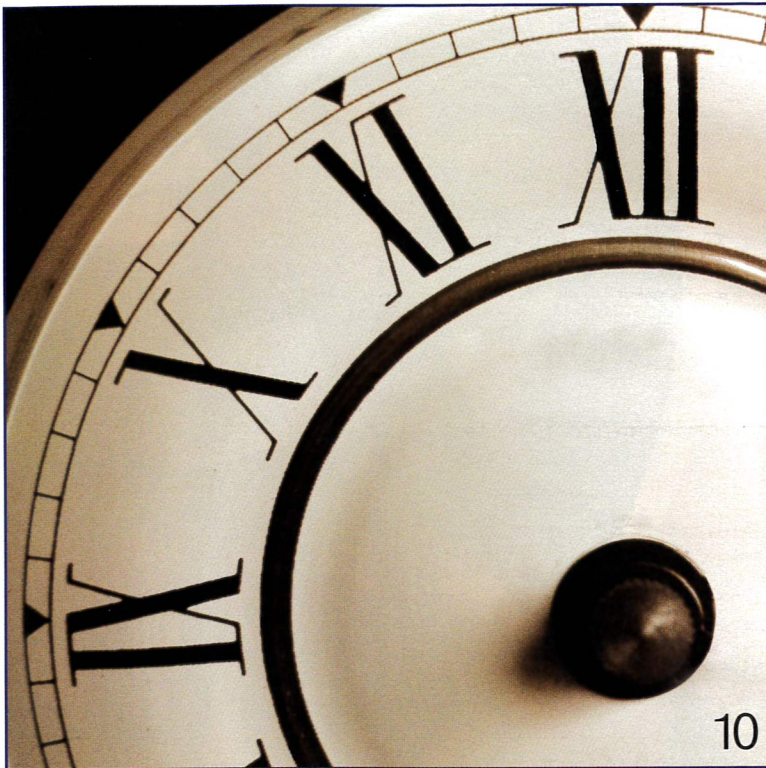
Prices are subject to change without notice. All orders are subject to shipping and handling fees and sales tax where applicable.

GREAT GIFTS—
for family
and friends!

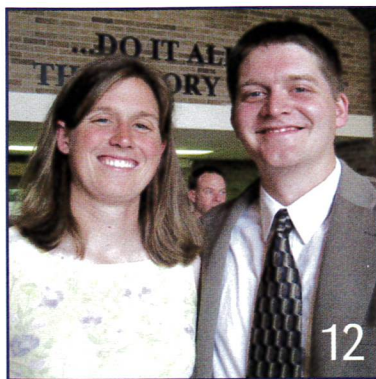
 Northwestern
Publishing House
1250 North 113th Street
Milwaukee, WI 53226-3284

To order, call 1-800-662-6022
or visit www.nph.net.

“To be thankful you need to have an eternal life perspective.”



SHUTTERSTOCK



Forward in Christ

✠ The official magazine of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

FEATURES

- 10 BE THANKFUL** An eternal life perspective helps us to be thankful in the face of life's ups and downs.
Jonathan R. Hein
- 12 ENCOURAGEMENT TO SERVE** Everyday experiences in a dormitory create opportunities to help point young men and women to the public ministry.
Joseph B. Gumm
- 14 CHRISTIAN INVOLVEMENT IN POLITICS** Some personal reflections from a former United States Congressman
Mark W. Neumann
- 16 PREDESTINATION—A DOCTRINE RICH IN GRACE** We can only understand the doctrine of predestination by looking up to the God of all grace.
Richard E. Lauersdorf
- 28 HEADING SOUTH FOR THE WINTER** Temporary winter residents gather to hear the gospel and help the congregations they visit.
Steven W. Wagenknecht
- 30 MOVING AWAY** Jesus watches over his believers on secular campuses too.
James Goldschmidt
- 36 THANK-YOU NOTES** One special note we often overlook is the one we should address to our God.
Laura E. Warmuth

**WELS endowments provide
smooth sailing,**

financially.

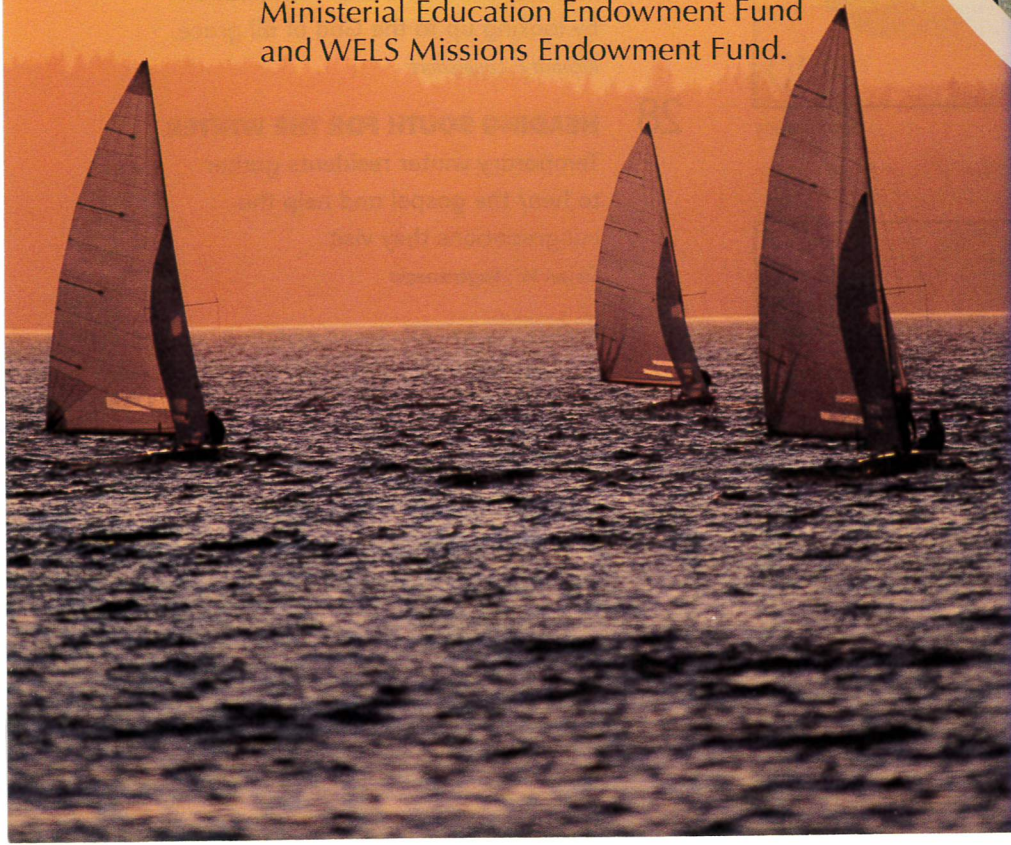
Outreach and education efforts are long-term projects that require continuous, predictable financial support. However, funding isn't always steady due to changes in the economy. To fill funding gaps and improve ministry efficiency, WELS has started two endowment funds: WELS Ministerial Education Endowment Fund and WELS Missions Endowment Fund.



Learn about the benefits of endowments and how you can make a gift by visiting www.wels.net/jump/endowment.

Also, a Christian giving counselor would be happy to assist you in setting up your estate plan to include a WELS endowment fund. There is no obligation or cost for consultation with a counselor.

Call
800-827-5482
for an appointment.



MAY THE LORD OUR GOD
BE WITH US AS HE WAS
WITH OUR FATHERS;
MAY HE NEVER LEAVE US
NOR FORSAKE US.

1 Kings 8:57

EDITORIAL OFFICE

Forward in Christ magazine
WELS Communication Services
2929 N Mayfair Rd
Milwaukee WI 53222-4398
Phone: 414-256-3210
Fax: 414-256-3862
E-mail: fic@sab.wels.net
www.wels.net

EXECUTIVE EDITOR

Rev. John A. Braun
braunj@nph.wels.net

MANAGING EDITOR

Julie K. Wietzke
julie.wietzke@sab.wels.net

STAFF WRITER

Laura C. Warmuth
laurachristine@wels.net

SEMINARY CONSULTANT

Prof. Daniel Leyrer

ART DIRECTOR

Karen Knutson

DESIGNER

Carianne Ciriacks

COPYRIGHT

©2006 by Forward in Christ. Printed in the USA. Forward in Christ grants permission for any original article (not a reprint) to be photocopied for use in a WELS church, school, or organization, provided that copies are distributed free and indicate Forward in Christ as the source. Artwork may not be reproduced except in the context of its article. For other copyright questions, contact Bob Adrian, 414-454-2112; adrianb@nph.wels.net.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

POSTMASTER

Send address changes to Forward in Christ, c/o Northwestern Publishing House, 1250 N 113 St, Milwaukee WI 53226-3284.

Forward in Christ (ISSN 1541-8936) is published monthly through Northwestern Publishing House, 1250 N 113 St, Milwaukee WI 53226-3284. Periodical postage paid at Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

SUBSCRIPTION RATES

Individual: USA—\$14; Canada—\$14.98; all other countries—air mail \$45.20. Postage included, payable in advance to Northwestern Publishing House. Contact Northwestern Publishing House for multi-year, blanket, and bundle rates. Northwestern Publishing House, 1250 N 113 St, Milwaukee WI 53226-3284; 800-662-6093, ext. 8. Milwaukee area, 414-615-5785. www.nph.net/periodicals.

ON AUDIO

Mission for the Visually Impaired, 375 Bridgepoint Dr, South St. Paul, MN 55075; 651-291-1536.

NOVEMBER

WHAT'S INSIDE *by Julie Wietzke*

Being thankful isn't always easy. When things are going well, we sometimes forget to thank the Giver of all gifts because we're just too busy being happy. When things aren't going so well, we're too wrapped up in our problems to remember all the things God has done for us.

In November, it seems to be a little easier to remember to thank God for all the things he has given us. (Maybe it's the national holiday that reminds us!) Our articles this month explore being thankful at all times and in all circumstances—good and bad. In "Be thankful" (p. 10), Jonathan Hein reminds us that no matter what happens on earth, we have an eternity with God waiting for us. Wow! Talk about something to be grateful for every day. But, even if we have eternal life to look forward to, it sometimes is difficult to thank God when we have troubles. John Braun shares how God uses earthly pain and suffering to turn us back to him and his Word (p. 34).

So how do you say thanks? We've all written the infamous thank-you note. But what would you say to God? On the back page, Laura Warmuth looks at what she would write.

DEPARTMENTS



- 6 FEEDBACK**
- 7 DEVOTION**
Comfort at the top of Mount Nebo *Peter A. Panitzke*
- 8 EDITORIAL COMMENT**
When troubles strike *Thomas J. Jeske*
- 9 QUESTION & ANSWER**
Murderers and eternal life *Richard L. Gurgel*
- 18 WHATEVER**
See you soon *Jessica Moore*
- 19 NEWS**
- 26 BULLETIN BOARD**
- 27 POTLUCK**
- 32 FROM THE PRESIDENT'S OFFICE**
Jesus, Priceless Treasure *Karl R. Gurgel*
- 33 BIBLE STUDY**
Lost in fear *Philip L. Kieselhorst*
- 34 A THOUGHT**
Thank God for thorns too *John A. Braun*
- 35 INTERACTIVE BIBLE STUDY**
A letter of hope *Randy K. Hunter*

RELIGION IN PUBLIC SCHOOL

I am writing about the Whatever article, "Religion is everywhere" [Aug.]. I agree that there is a mixture of religions in the public school system. I also agree that wherever there is a mixture of religions, it provides ample opportunity to share your faith. However, as a young mother, I cannot fathom sending my daughter to anything but a Lutheran grade school and high school. . . .

I am glad that there are students like Susan Decker, whose faith is strong enough to withstand the opposition found in public high schools. I just know that I would not have been able to handle that in high school. I feel that the price we pay for Lutheran education is well worth the financial sacrifices we have to make. I graduated grade school with around 20 students. The majority of those students went to the area public high school, mainly because the cost of tuition for the Lutheran high school was felt to be too high. Out of those students, only one is still going to church. And like Susan, his faith was strong enough to handle the opposition. With statistics like that, I don't think you can afford NOT to send your child to a Lutheran high school.

*Katrina Meinel
Platteville, Wisconsin*

CREATION/EVOLUTION

I was pleased to see Joel D. Otto's article about the creation/evolution debate [Aug.]. This is the right time in history to bring this matter to public attention—particularly for Christians. . . .

The weaknesses of the theory of evolution have become apparent to those in scientific circles. . . . We need to arm both the students in our schools and the adults in our congregations against the errors of evolution. It just might also influence other denominations, many of which have wandered from some basic truths.

*Jean Nepsund
North Hollywood, California*

I am a scientist. . . . Genesis tells us that at creation the world had features that appeared to have grown and progressed. Examples are adult people, grown trees, and light from the stars. . . .

The light from the closest star takes 4.5 years to get here. Not only did Adam see light that was created on its way, but its presence is consistent with the biblical account of light created even before the stars.

God said it was good. When I say something I make is good, I have high standards. When God says it about his creation it is astounding. I think that the entire universe is like the above examples and appeared old and in mid-process when created. . . .

Some claim that the big bang theory is a description of God's creation. In fact, it is just part of that apparent history God gave as part of his "good" creation a few thousand years ago. These people say that the big bang creation is easier to believe than God's six-day creation. That is never a valid argument for the truth.

Christian scientists and theologians should have no argument with the truths of the Bible or with each other.

*Walter Naumann
Santa Barbara, California*

CHECKS AND BALANCES

Regarding "A Reaction to the District Conventions" [Sept.], most authorities would agree that President Gurgel's understanding of "checks and balances" is mistaken. "Accountability" refers to the responsibility of the operators of any system to justify their actions to a higher authority that has the power either to ratify or reverse those actions. Checks and balances refer to safeguards built into the system itself to help the system operators avoid error and maintain quality control. . . .

Today in WELS, almost all decision-making authority has been vested in just one body. Our Synodical Council proposes projects, approves expenditures to carry them out, and

oversees most of the synod's fundraising efforts. The checks and balances in the system are limited, at best.

The proposed new administrative structure suggests combining the Conference of Presidents and Synodical Council into a single national council. The separation of powers in the system would all but disappear. No checks and balances, as they are normally defined, would exist.

*Marcus Manthey
Saginaw, Michigan*

Regarding "A Reaction to the District Conventions" [Sept.]. If we work with accepted definitions instead of the definition offered by President Gurgel, then the restructuring proposal the district conventions considered both centralizes authority and reduces checks and balances.

Making all existing area of ministry boards (men serving across synod) advisory to the administrators (men serving in Milwaukee) centralizes authority, because instead of executing decisions made by grass-roots-based boards, administrators make the decisions.

"Checks and balances" means more than reporting and regular elections. It means there is a division of responsibility and the ability to say, "No." . . . Today the Synodical Council sets income projections and plans the work program. It can increase income projections (and has) to cover its planned expenses. That's not a check and balance.

Centralized decision making by Milwaukee administrators would not make a national council accountable, nor provide it with a check or balance. It even removes another check and balance: the area of ministry boards' oversight of their work.

*John Seifert
Michigan District President*

Send your letters to **Feedback**, *Forward in Christ*, 2929 N Mayfair Rd, Milwaukee, WI 53222; fic@sab.wels.net. Letters between 100 and 200 words are preferred. Include full name and address. Letters are edited for clarity, conciseness, and relevance. Not all letters received can be acknowledged or used. Writers' views are not necessarily those of WELS or *Forward in Christ*.

Comfort at the top of Mount Nebo

Then Moses climbed Mount Nebo . . . There the LORD showed him the whole land . . . "This is the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob . . . I have let you see it with your eyes, but you will not cross over into it."

Deuteronomy 34:1-4

Peter A. Panitzke

This summer I was privileged to go to the Holy Land. I did not climb Mount Nebo, but I did see the land that Moses saw from Mount Nebo's summit.

Moses' view of the Promised Land

If I had been Moses, I would have been disappointed. From that vantage point, the Promised Land did not look very appealing. Immediately ahead of Moses was the Dead Sea. Its name says it all. Looking up from the Dead Sea, Moses would have seen the Judean wilderness with its barren hills and steep valleys. To Moses' right was a bright spot, the oasis around Jericho. But overall, the immediate vicinity of Mount Nebo was desolate.

Moses had to look farther and higher to see that this was a good land. Farther to the west he would have seen the green mountaintops of the Judean and Samaritan highlands. But even then, the best land would have been beyond his view. The best land was on the western slopes of those highlands and far to the north in the Jezreel Valley and Galilee, where rain sufficient for agriculture falls.

Our view of eternal life

Did you climb Mount Nebo this year?

If you sat in a church pew as a mourner, you looked across your own Dead Sea, the coffin of your loved one. The floral arrangements added a splash of color like the Jericho oasis, but overall your loved one's future seemed bleak and dry like the Judean wilderness.

How do you know the person in that casket crossed over into a good land? Look past the casket and the flowers. Like Moses, look farther and higher. Look up to the cross of Christ. The cross is the tree of life! It is the green on the mountaintops of Israel. There Jesus' blood satisfied the deadly justice of God's law. Through the cross we pass over from death to life.

Our loved ones have crossed over into a good land. But like Moses, so much of that land we are not able to see. We know it only by promise. How comforting that promise is! The saints in heaven "are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Revelation 7:15-17).

Perhaps this year, Saints Triumphant Sunday (Nov. 19) is a very personal day to you. Maybe you know a saint whom Jesus called to cross over into this new land. If so, I invite you to join me in climbing to the top of Mount Nebo. Look across the Dead Sea of pain and death your loved one experienced.



Look up to the cross to see life. And by faith look beyond the cross to see the life the saints enjoy.

Like Moses, we have not been allowed to cross over into that country with our loved one. But we will. Until then, find comfort in this view from the top of Mount Nebo.

Contributing editor Peter Panitzke is pastor at St. Paul, Muskego, Wisconsin.

When troubles strike

Thomas J. Jeske

“Remember,” repeated my friend, “God will never give you more than you can handle.” That felt certain, the way a door closes on an expensive car. But was it true?

If God never gave people more than they could handle, why would they need God? Always strong, ever brave, never at a loss for an answer—had I been that person? May I be reasonably sure that I will be a friend, father, and neighbor who never fails and always handles every situation? Do I just need to lean my head back against the wall, close my eyes, take a few cleansing breaths, and call to mind this cool clear universal truth to chase away my fears as I reload?

Does “God will never give you more than you can handle” serve as an honest last line for all the different chapters of your life? What would be the sense of singing “A Mighty Fortress is Our God” if I hadn’t needed to run inside that fortress, bent over, hands on my knees, chest heaving, and catch my breath? “God is our refuge and strength” would be unnecessary except for the fool who forgets that he is a match for the worries of the day. We hear God saying, “Get back out there, soldier, and face your fears. You can do it all.”

Rather, the Scriptures and experience teach that God is always giving people more than they can handle. It’s in his fatherly interests to permit a human being to be overwhelmed. The question is not, “Will I be swept off my feet by powers beyond my control?” but rather, “Where will I turn when my strength is no match for my troubles?”

What about a biblical source for “God will never give you more than you can handle?” We find a near match in 1 Corinthians 10. One of Jesus’ apostles is addressing a congregation of Christians. They lacked love for one another. Instead of following the path of love, they gave in to the temptation and splintered themselves again and again over issues.

Paul reminded them that they were indeed Christians. They had baptism and the Lord’s Supper. But God did not give them forgiveness and freedom so that you may live as if “once saved, always saved” . . . or look at grace as a license to sin.

Paul cites half a dozen episodes (v. 6-10) in the church history of Old Testament Israel. To read these examples is to feel an icy hand of God’s law on the back of your neck. God is not mocked. “If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!” (v. 12). Many Israelites who had once carried the name “God’s chosen people” did fall. The fearful wrath of God still operates against self-satisfaction and hard hearts. Scorn it at your peril!

We don’t always stand tall, able to handle every trouble, pain, distress, or difficulty. When we think we can, we forget the grace—undeserved and free—that God offers to us. God overwhelms us with life, death, and trouble at times. Take comfort for Christ’s sake: “God will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear” (v. 13).

“God receives none but those who are forsaken, restores health to none but those who are sick, gives sight to none but the blind, and life to none but the dead. He does not give saintliness to any but sinners, nor wisdom to any but fools. He has mercy on none but the wretched and gives grace

to none but those who are in disgrace” (Martin Luther, *The Seven Penitential Psalms*, 1517, as quoted in *Day by Day We Magnify Thee*). God does not save his children from temptations; he turns them toward Christ in the thick of them.

God does not save his children from temptations; he turns them toward Christ in the thick of them.

Contributing editor Tom Jeske is pastor at Living Hope, Omaha, Nebraska.



at the foot of the cross. Richard L. Gurgel

TOPIC: Murderers and eternal life

By saying that all you must have is faith to be saved, does that mean that as long as a murderer has faith he will be saved? Christ asks us to follow him. I would have to say that Christ, while here on earth, gave us many examples of the importance of good works by his own actions. You must start by having faith and continue by living your life as Christ lived his . . . which takes A LOT of work!

If murderers can't be saved, is there any hope for any of us? 1 John 3:15 tells us, "Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him." With those words doesn't John unceremoniously dump us all into the eternal death row of murderers who by all rights have forfeited eternal life?

Of course, being lumped together with "real sinners" offends us. Our sinful nature loves to make lists of "big sins" (usually the sins of others) and "little sins" (usually ours). In this way we vainly attempt at least a partial "justification by comparison."

But we're making the wrong comparison. If someone wants to enter heaven because their obedience to God is better than others', we make heaven a gift of works. God's standard isn't a comparison with other sinners but with his perfection reflected in his law!

Where does that lead? "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law" (Galatians 3:10). These words weren't written about those who planned to banish the message of Christ crucified from the pulpit but about those who wanted to add works to the gospel message. Paul wrote about those who taught that faith in Christ was a good start towards heaven, but there were at least a few additional required acts of obedience. Paul lets them—and us—know that the "human-obedience-path" to heaven hopelessly puts us all under a curse.

The only way for any murderer to be saved is by God's grace in Jesus. Jesus allowed the

just judgment of hell for all our murders, and every other sin, to fall on him instead of us.

Didn't gracious proof that heaven is a free gift for "big sinners" hang right next to Jesus on the cross? We don't know exactly what capital offense the criminal on the cross committed, but he admits that his sentence was just (Luke 23:41). What we do know is that this criminal died with faith in Jesus; he entered heaven. That "three-seconds-to-midnight" rescue is powerful testimony that faith in Jesus is not just a start to receiving God's gift of heaven. It is the beginning, middle, and end of the salvation "that is by faith from first to last" (Romans 1:17).

Now, please don't misunderstand. We cannot "go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means!" (Romans 6:1,2). Daily we struggle to crucify our old self by running in repentance from sin that will otherwise destroy faith. Daily we feed our new self through the means of grace. That gives us power to live as disciples of Jesus (Ephesians 4:22-24). Daily we seek to use that strength to follow Christ as we serve those he places around us.

Is this struggle to live our faith "a lot" of work? Certainly. But this difficult struggle daily to live out who we are is not an attempt to prove anything to God. Instead we do it in the confidence that the Father has already lavished his love on us as dearly loved children and heirs of heaven (1 John 3:1). We don't want to treat his lavish grace lightly. We don't strive with all the Spirit's might in living sanctified lives to become something we aren't. We do it because of who we already are!

Contributing editor Richard Gurgel, a professor at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wisconsin, is a member at Calvary, Thiensville.

Have a question? Send it to **Q&A**, *Forward in Christ*, 2929 N Mayfair Rd, Milwaukee WI 53222; fic@sab.wels.net. Look online at www.wels.net/jump/qa, for more questions and answers.

XY Be

X

Imagine a timeline representing one million years. A zero is at the left edge of the line and one million years on the right edge. Now imagine shading in the first 80 years of that timeline, the length of a good life span. I know that it's hard to imagine. On that timeline, 80 years is just one very thin line.

Try another timeline. This one represents 24 hours, just one day. Using the same proportions as the first timeline, what part of one day would 80 years represent? Seven seconds. Proportionally, seven seconds is to a day what 80 years is to a million years.

Having an eternal life perspective

Now imagine you got up one morning, and for seven seconds absolutely everything went wrong. Reaching for your alarm clock, you knocked it off the table, and it shattered. You bolted up, banged your head, and stepped on the pieces of the alarm clock on the floor. You stub your toe on the way to the bathroom. It hurt so bad you thought that you broke it. Seven seconds of trouble. It's a lousy start. But then, the next 23 hours, 59 minutes, and 53 seconds go amazingly well—no problems or pain. In fact, everything was perfect. Would you call that a good day? I think you would.

Remember the one million-year timeline? The thin line represents 80 years. Imagine that you have 80 years of nothing but headache and heartbreak. But then, that hard 80 years is followed by 999,920 years

An eternal life perspective helps

of beauty and bliss. Everything is perfect. Would you say, overall, that was a good million years? Again, I think you would. When we have enjoyed heaven for a million years, we've just begun. That's why we call it eternal life.

The point is to illustrate that to be thankful you need to have an "eternal life perspective." As the writer to the Hebrews puts it: "Since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful" (12:28).

The Hebrew Christians were having a hard time of it. By converting to Christianity, they had lost the social network of the synagogues. They faced harassment. Their property had been illegally seized. Some had been imprisoned. So what were they to do? Despair? Complain? Return to Judaism?

In Jesus, they had one who understood how hard life can be, for he "shared in their humanity" (Hebrews 2:14). In Jesus, they had one who dealt with the root cause of all adversity and ailment—sin. In Jesus, they had a home where there would be neither injustice nor injury. Like their father Abraham, they could "[look] forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Hebrews 11:10). To leave Christ would be to forfeit all that. Therefore, rather than grumbling about their lot, those Hebrew Christians needed to keep an eternal life perspective. Instead of focusing on what they didn't have, they needed to focus on what they would have forever. If they would do that, they would conclude: "Since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful."

Being thankful in the bad times

Perhaps this Thanksgiving you ask the question: "Will this be my last?" That ugly word—cancer—looms large. Should you despair? Should you be afraid? I hope not! Remember, you will be totally cured, if not in this life, then certainly in the next. If you believe that, then be thankful.

Maybe this Thanksgiving you will remember how

XIII

Thankful

Jonathan R. Hein

us to be thankful in the face of life's ups and downs.

hard it was to make ends meet this past year. You were living paycheck to paycheck. "When will God give me a break?" you wonder. But what if you must scratch to get by until you die? You can still be thankful. For in that death, Jesus will share with you all that is his. His riches, his luxury, his glory—these will all be yours.

Then look at that empty chair at the Thanksgiving table, reminding you of someone—a grandmother, spouse, or even a child—who was taken from

Therefore, "since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful."

Being thankful in the good times

Having an eternal life perspective is important in good times too. Maybe this was a great year for you. That was not by accident. Nor can your success be attributed solely to your hard work. Others worked just as hard as you did and didn't have such a good year. The abundance you enjoyed was a special gift of God, over and above

I can be bold in sharing the truth. Not everyone will like hearing the truth, which means not everyone will like me. Big deal! So I am called some names. In my fellow Christians, I still have a family who loves me. On top of that, I'm eventually going to an eternal kingdom with gates so strong, no opponent of the truth—not even Satan—will be able to set foot inside. I would like as many people as possible to join me in that kingdom. And so as I share the truth, I will be bold. It's one small way I can "be thankful" that the Holy Spirit has allowed me to believe the truth. He has given me eternal life. An eternal life perspective—it's so important!

Make your list of blessings!

In the next couple of weeks, someone is going to remind you to "count your blessings." Children will come up with lists that include their toys, Fluffy the cat, and their favorite flavor of ice cream. This is all good. God is indeed the giver of those little things. But as you count your blessings, please don't forget the big ones. Honestly, as you make your list, you could write:

1. The forgiveness of all my sins.
2. Eternal life in heaven.

And stop. Because everything else—if I might use the language of the season—is gravy.


Jon Hein is pastor at Beautiful Savior, Summerville, South Carolina.

When we have enjoyed heaven for a million years, we've just begun. That's why we call it eternal life.

you this past year. How can you be thankful for that? Remember that Christ overcome death and removed its sting! Sitting in heaven, your Christian loved one is joyously thankful! Moreover, you will see them again. But that's not strong enough. You will touch them again when Christ raises you both on the Last Day. You will hug and laugh. You will enjoy one another's company for a century. Then another century. Then another. A million years will go by, and you will still be together.

the spiritual blessings. You can use that abundance to demonstrate thankfulness if you keep an eternal life perspective.

If eternal life is mine, then I can be generous. I can help my church, my family, my synod, even strangers. Yes, it might mean fewer creature comforts for me. So what? I have all eternity to be comfortable! Right now, I can sacrifice those comforts in service of Christ and others. I am thankful for what lies ahead.



Tutor, can I have car permission to go to Wal-Mart?"

"Tutor, I locked myself out of my room. Do you think you could let me in?"

"Tutor, I have a question about the homework assignment you gave. Do we have to do it?"

These were but a few of the questions that I was asked almost every day as a tutor at Luther Preparatory School (LPS), Watertown, Wis., one of the synod's prep schools. "Tutor" was my title, but I actually did very little tutoring, at least in the sense of helping with homework. The title comes from the early years of Northwestern College. "Tutor" meant "dorm supervisor." I lived in the dormitory with my wife Annie and about 30 teenage boys on my floor.

Besides granting permission to those students who would like to drive their cars, opening locked doors, and handing out homework assignments, I had many other duties as a tutor. My main focus was in the dormitory. I watched study hall every night, and I made sure everyone was in bed on time. I supervised the cafeteria at mealtimes.

I drove sick students to the doctor. I woke up early to unlock the doors in the dorm, and

I got mail from the post office. And I actually did teach a limited class schedule during the day.

Teaching at Luther Preparatory School was a unique situation because I also went to high school there. Now I can say that I have shared in this school's mission of preparing young people for future ministry as a student and as a teacher. As a student at Prep, I had role models in my professors and tutors. They were examples of faith in action—in the classroom, on the playing field, and in the community. These teachers expressed a certain zeal for teaching and a love for what they taught. They were an encouragement for the public ministry.

As a part of the staff, I now had this opportunity to encourage young men and women for the ministry. I remember spending some time after bed checks talking with two young men, roommates who definitely have the potential and the ability to serve in the public ministry. We chatted about college choices and what it is like to be a teacher. I told each of them that from what I have seen of them they have the God-given talents to be public ministers. God willing, when these young men graduate from Prep, they will go on to Martin Luther College. What a blessing it is to be like Barnabas—a "Son of Encouragement!" (Acts 4:36).

Unfortunately, as is true for all of us, the students at Prep are sinners and fall into various temptations. When a young man is caught in a lie, when a young woman cheats on a test, these are opportunities not only to lead them

ENCOURAGEMENT TO SERVE

Everyday experiences in a dormitory create opportunities to help point young men and women to the public ministry.

Joseph B. Gumm

to repentance but also to be a role model for them. When troubles arise and our sins seem too much, where do we look? The cross, where Jesus took away all our sins. When sickness, pain, and grief afflict, where do we look? The Word, for there we see the promises of God. What an opportunity I had to model this behavior for my students and to point them to their Savior!

Another of my duties was to preach for evening chapel. I kept this passage from Romans in mind every time I stood in front of the student body in chapel: "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (1:16). What amazing power God's Word has—to change unbelieving hearts, to heal sin-sick souls, to comfort the distraught! Why be ashamed of something as wonderful as the gospel? Every student at Luther Prep hears how important the gospel is. They hear it every day in chapel and in their classes. May God grant that our synodical schools continue to produce young men and women who are bold to share the message of the gospel and are confident in the power of the Word.

Joseph Gumm was a tutor at Luther Preparatory School, Watertown, Wisconsin, from 2004 to 2006. He now teaches at Salem, Colorado Springs, Colorado.



Annie and Joseph Gumm.



Joseph Gumm preaching for chapel at Luther Prep.

Just as Joe Gumm encouraged students to consider the full-time ministry, so also WELS members around the world can help young adults see the need for and the joy of serving the Lord full time. Allison German, a freshman at Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn., shares her story:

I decided to transfer from my public high school to Kettle Moraine Lutheran High School, Jackson, Wis., during my junior year. As sure as I was to transfer schools mid-year, there was a time I began to doubt if being a WELS teacher was really that important to me.

Once we started studying other religions in Mr. David Bartelt's senior religion class, however, I began to understand the meaning of evangelism. Mr. Bartelt was going to attend a Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall to prepare for the class, and my good friend Jason and I asked to come along. I don't have the space to tell you all that occurred that day, but I will forever remember it. Jehovah's Witnesses are the most tragically nice people I've ever met. I've never felt more welcomed while attending a worship service. And yet I left that service absolutely empty, feeling I had spent the past three hours in a building where Christ wasn't present.

Through that experience, I was able to see actual people who needed Christ. They weren't just one of the millions of non-Christians we read about. They were members of my community. Thanks to Mr. Bartelt, I learned the meaning of evangelism.

My Lutheran education, as KML's mission statement says, "educated, encouraged, and equipped" me with the necessary tools to go out and evangelize. With the Holy Spirit's help, I hope to do this each day of my life. I also hope to lay the foundations of evangelism in young Christians so they can venture out into their communities and give to their neighbors the message of Christ.

An anonymous quote says, "A ship in a harbor is safe, but that's not what ships are built for." It would be so easy to go through life securely in a port, to stay safe, to never do anything for Christ—simply because his grace requires nothing from us.

But the Bible says that in all we do, we should bring glory to God (Colossians 3:17). You can certainly do this without a career as a called worker. However, for me, I see no greater blessing than knowing that the labors I put in at my full-time vocation will help children grow closer to their Savior. That means everything to me.

CHRISTIAN

Some personal reflections from a former United States Congressman

Mark W. Neumann

The real debate then should be centered on whether it is desirable for a Christian to be involved in the political process and the selection of our governing authorities or leaders. It even leads to the question of Christians being involved in the process to the point of actually running for office.

We elect our leaders

In the Old Testament God directly called leaders. One need only think of Moses. He was living comfortably in Midian, tending his father-in-law's flocks, when God called him to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. He became the political and religious leader of Israel. He was not elected. The people were not involved in deciding he should be their leader.

At our particular time in history, God in his wisdom has permitted us to elect our governing officials.

It was with this understanding that after much prayer and careful consideration my wife, Sue, and I decided to run for the United States House of Representatives. The Lord's planning was clearly present in our efforts.

Having never run for any public office and knowing no one with political knowledge or experience, the whole concept of running for Congress was more than a little overwhelming. In our first two races we had the resources to hire "political" experts to assist us.

We knocked on thousands of doors so we could meet the folks we hoped to represent. The political experts taught us to answer questions truthfully, but in a way that would not

offend anyone. "Wishy-washy" and "political" are words that would describe my responses as taught by the political experts. We lost both of the first two races.

In the third race no one gave us a chance of winning. We had limited resources so almost no political people were involved. Sue and I vowed that when asked any question—whether about our religion or our stand on other difficult issues such as abortion—we would simply answer in a calm and straightforward manner. We accepted the fact that acknowledging our Lord and Savior and our deep religious beliefs as well as our commitment to a Judeo-Christian value system would come under sharp criticism.

It did. On a regular basis, we had picketers, usually pro-abortion folks but others as well, who attempted to disrupt our efforts. Twice I can remember distinctly that they tried to physically disrupt events.

Yet something else wonderful happened. As those opposed to us leveled their sharp criticism, others supported us. Thousands and thousands of strong Christians stood with us and put in a tremendous effort to overcome the attacks and elect us to office.

We will never forget the night that we were first elected. It was raining hard as we drove through a small town in the district. In this town we knew the vote would be about 80 percent in our favor. People were lined up a block down the street, waiting in the rain to get into the building to vote.

Considerable debate continues over the role Christians are to have in politics. It's not new. Abraham Lincoln's presidency was marked by the debate over the abolition of slavery, and Christians joined others in this debate. This has been the case with many issues throughout our history. Today many Christians are leading the debates on issues such as abortion and the definition of marriage.

But perhaps we first should define politics. In the United States and in most democracies politics really is a process whereby we select our governing leaders and where "we the people" have a chance to have input into and influence the decisions of these governing officials.

To understand this issue one must first remember that God in his wisdom has the ability to accomplish his plans without any help from us. This concept certainly applies to issues that are decided by our governing officials. It is not "necessary" for Christians to be involved in politics in order for God to carry out his plans.

INVOLVEMENT IN POLITICS

In hindsight the Lord's planning was clear in our lives and in the elections. It was a tremendous privilege to do our best to humbly represent the views and values of the many Christian people who supported us.

What do we owe the leaders we choose?

Understanding that God in his wisdom has given us the process we have also helps us to appreciate that we must accept the outcome of elections, whether we like them or not. I cannot describe how difficult this was in our Senate race and how many fine Christian people expressed their displeasure at our narrow loss.

But we must remember Romans 13:1: "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God."

Later in the same chapter the apostle continues, "This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: if you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor" (v. 6,7).

It is easy as a Christian to forget this part of Scripture, especially when there is a political leader whom we oppose or one who is promoting ideas and values other than those described in Scripture. In this life, we should not expect to fully understand God's plan for the world we live in. God asks us simply to submit whether or not we understand.

How should we be involved?

If Christians should be involved in the political process, then the next logical questions are how should they be involved and whom should they support.

I like to think of one parable Jesus used. At the end of his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talks about a wise man as one whom puts his words into practice (Matthew 7:24). It seems to follow that a Christian should look to support someone who puts Jesus' words into practice—someone who is willing to apply Christian principles to governing decisions.

It is important that in choosing that person to support that one learns as much as possible about that person on a firsthand basis. Meet the candidate in person. Ask questions and look for reasonable answers.

Any candidate, even a Christian candidate, is human and therefore not perfect. If one agrees with 98 percent of what a candidate stands for, do not refuse to support him or her. It would not help anyone if Christians stayed home on Election Day because they had a two percent disagreement with a candidate.

There are many ways to support a candidate. If one's gift includes resources, then give money. If it includes the ability to put signs in yards, then put signs in yards. If one's talents are to call radio stations or write letters to editors, then do that.

I believe that the reason to get involved in the process is to help do good for our neigh-

bors and fellow citizens and to influence governing authorities to look at issues through the Christian perspective. But I also think that Edmund Burke, an English statesman of the 1700s, gives us something to think about. He wrote, "In order for evil to triumph the good people need only to sit by and watch."

Mark Neumann is a member at Christ, Pewaukee, Wisconsin. He served in the United States House of Representatives from 1995-1999.



Predestination— a doctrine rich in grace

We can only understand the doctrine of predestination by looking up to the God of all grace.

Richard E. Lauersdorf

People get into trouble with the doctrine of predestination because they look in the wrong direction. They lower their eyes from the God of all grace to themselves. They try to wrap the arms of their reason around this rich teaching only to end up with more questions than answers. Why does God choose some and not others? Are some better, easier to bring to faith, more willing to cooperate in their conversion? Did God choose some for salvation and others for damnation? How the devil must chuckle when people look down from God's grace and love in Christ to themselves and their own supposed merits

and capabilities. For such the doctrine of predestination becomes one rife with speculation. For us it is rather a doctrine rich in grace.

Elected in eternity

When my wife and I married, we had no idea if any or how many children would be in our family. We ended up with four, all precious gifts from the Lord.

How different with God's heavenly family. He hasn't been wondering all these years how large his family would be. Way back in eternity, before there was any dirt on earth to shovel or any angel in heaven to sing his praise, God had his family made up. In his mercy he chose those "individuals whom he would in time convert to the gospel of Christ and preserve in faith to eternal life" (*This We Believe*, p. 16). He planned to send his Son to redeem fallen mankind. In addition, his will was to have children with him in heaven. And already in eternity he chose them.


Elected in Christ Jesus

Listen to Paul, "For [God] chose us in [Christ] before the creation of

the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves" (Ephesians 1:4-6). See where the focus is and must always be. On God! *He* "chose" us, *he* "predestined" us—both meaning to pick out of a large number. And this wasn't some random selection. Individually God chose you and me out of the whole mass of humanity to be sons and daughters in his heavenly family.

This choosing he did "in Christ." Last spring we attended our granddaughter's honors ceremony as she graduated from high school. This ceremony honored the top 10 students in the class, the ones who were named to the National Honor Society. Qualifications and achievements were the criteria for such honors. Not so for those whom God has elected in Christ! What qualities or achievements could people, born in sin and living in sin, offer God? How could people born as enemies of God and intent on staying that way ever say to God, "Choose me"? How could people born with hell as their sure destination and





picking up speed on the way each day dare to ask God, "Take me to heaven"?

Our election is all wrapped up in the redeeming sacrifice of Christ. As Paul reminded Timothy, "[God] has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time" (2 Timothy 1:9). It's in Christ, by Christ, through Christ. Not only did God in eternity choose us for his family, but he also planned how to make this possible. He planned the sending of his Son, "the One he loves," to take on our flesh, take on our sins, take them to Calvary's cross, and take them away forever. Because of Jesus' redeeming work we can "stand holy and blameless in his sight" already now and finally on judgment day.

Elected in grace

I look at myself and wonder, "Why me?" Was it just fortunate coincidence that God pointed his finger at me? Was it because he saw that I would be somewhat inclined to accept his offer? Was it because he foresaw that I would remain faithful to the end? Or was it because of some special feature that made me different from those not elected? No! A loud, large, emphatic "NO" to each of those questions.

Again I need to lift my eyes from me up to God. There's only one answer for his choosing me. It's that word "grace," a word that means something given to someone completely free and

undeserved.

In his love he sent Jesus to pay for the world's sins, mine included. In his grace he sends his Spirit through Word and sacrament to bring me to faith in the salvation his Son has prepared. Already in eternity his grace chose to do such wonderful things for me! God's amazing grace and the merits of Christ are the causes of my election.

Questions? Of course, I have plenty of them. But they fade out of the picture when I keep faith's eyes focused on God's grace and love for me in Christ. Tell me—if I were a passenger on a large cruise liner, and if that liner were to sink in the chilly waters of the sea, and if a freighter were to arrive and throw out a life line to me, and if I were to stand shivering and safe on the deck of that freighter, would I say to the captain, "Why me? What about those others still in the waters?" Or would I wrap my arms around him and say over and over again, "Thank you, thank you, thank you"?

It's time to look up at that God of all love and grace in Christ Jesus and say to him, "Thank you for your grace in choosing me. Thank you for your love in sending Jesus to pay for me."

Richard Lauersdorf serves as a visitation pastor at Good Shepherd, West Bend, Wisconsin.

Next month: Predestination: a doctrine rich in comfort

Go to www.forwardinchrist.net to find out more. A Bible study on predestination will be available after Nov. 5.

This We Believe, a booklet containing the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod's doctrinal position, offers more insights on predestination:

5. We believe that already before the world was created, God chose those individuals whom he would in time convert through the gospel of Christ and preserve in faith to eternal life (Ephesians 1:4-6; Romans 8:29,30). This election to faith and salvation in no way was caused by anything in people but shows how completely salvation is by grace alone (Romans 11:5,6).

7. We reject any teaching that people in any way contribute to their salvation. We reject the belief that people with their own power can cooperate in their conversion or make a decision for Christ (John 15:16). We reject the belief that those who are converted were less resistant to God's grace than those who remain unconverted. We reject all efforts to present faith as a condition people must fulfill to complete their justification. We reject all attempts of sinners to justify themselves before God.

10. We reject the false and blasphemous conclusion that those who are lost were predestined, or elected, by God to damnation, for God wants all people to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9).

— This We Believe, Northwestern Publishing House, 1999, pp. 16, 17

WHATEVER

See you soon

I know that my dad is in heaven. Even though I miss him, I'll see him again.

Jessica Moore

I remember those last few months with my dad. I remember that one day he came home from work, and when I hugged him I could tell how much weight he had really lost. He must have known what I was thinking, because he told me that he was going to the doctor and he was going to get better.

Before he went into the hospital, I gave him a stuffed frog that I had gotten when I went into the hospital when I was younger. Later he always had it at his bedside. I guess it was like a small part of me was still there with him even when I left the hospital.

They put all kinds of tubes into him, and I really thought he was going to get better when each day he gained a pound. It was so hard to go to the hospital every day to see him and then to have to leave at night. I would look out the car window as we drove away until I couldn't see the hospital sign anymore.

One night, after he got out of surgery, I went to the hospital to see him. He was so drugged up, and I couldn't really understand why. My mom took my brother and me into a waiting room and told us that my dad had pancreatic cancer. It didn't mean much to me at the time. Lots of people get cancer. They get put on chemotherapy, they get better. End of story. But that's not how this story ended.

He didn't go back to work. Instead he stayed home on medications with hospice workers coming to make sure he was all right. My mom explained to me that he wasn't going to get better. But I never really gave up hope, and I don't think he did either.

But the worst came when I heard an ambulance and voices early one morning. My mom came upstairs and told us to get up because my dad was going to the hospital again. I quickly ran down the stairs and saw the EMS personnel taking him out of our house in a

wheelchair with an oxygen mask over his face. It was just so unreal. My mom went with them and told my brother and me to go to our neighbor's house. I don't even remember what I did at school that day. I just remember going to the hospital that night.

The Intensive Care Unit is definitely the worst place in an entire hospital. When I went in, I saw my dad. I was sitting in one of the chairs when our pastor came in and asked my dad how he was feeling. What my dad said broke my heart. He started to talk and then said, "I'm too weak." I don't think he was. I think that he just didn't want to say what my mom told the pastor. She told him that the doctor said my dad wouldn't make it through the night.

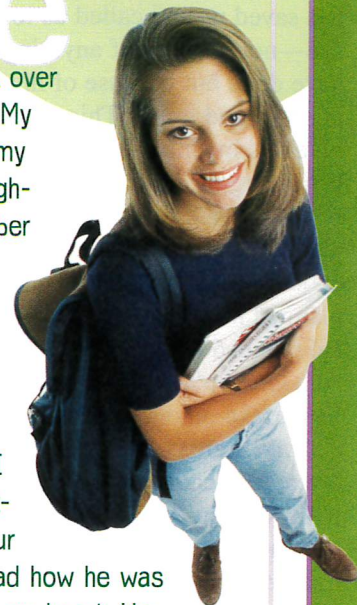
The pastor read him Psalm 23, and my dad just listened. It was then that I realized how important faith really was to him.

Dad was finally moved out of ICU and into a normal room. He had a whiteboard in his room, and on it I wrote, "See you soon." I still remember the last words I said to him that night: "I love you."

My dad passed away.

Whenever I am feeling sad or weak in my faith, I recall when the pastor read Psalm 23 to my dad, and I think about how strong he was in his faith. I know that my dad is in heaven, and, even though I miss him, what gets me through is knowing that I'll see him soon.

Jessica Moore, a junior at Lakeside Lutheran High School, Lake Mills, Wisconsin, is a member at St. Paul, Lake Mills.



Obituaries

Esther L. Raabe 1932-2006

Esther Raabe (nee Oestreich) was born July 14, 1932, in Milwaukee, Wis. She died June 16, 2006, in Watertown, Wis.

A 1955 graduate of Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn., she served Good Shepherd, Phoenix, Ariz., and Bethany, Hustisford, Wis.

She was preceded in death by her husband, Ruben. She is survived by three sons and one daughter.

Rupert Eggert 1924-2006

Rupert Eggert was born Oct. 16, 1924, in Brookside, Wis. He died Aug. 30, 2006, in Hendricks, Minn.

He served as a teacher at Northwestern College, Watertown, Wis.; a pastor at churches in Atmore, Ala., and Pensacola, Fla.; as missionary in Puerto Rico; as friendly counselor to missions in Mexico; as pastor at San Pablo, Tucson, Ariz.; Abiding Savior,

Weslaco, Tex.; and Trinity, Hendricks, Minn.

He is survived by his wife, Annie Ruth; two sons; five grandchildren; two brothers; a sister-in-law; and many nieces and nephews.

Loyal Schroeder 1922-2006

Loyal Leroy Schroeder was born on Oct. 29, 1922, in Whitehall, Wis. He died Sept. 3, 2006.

A 1948 graduate of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis., he served at Northwestern Lutheran Academy, Mobridge, S.D.; St. John and rural Tuckertown parishes, Hillpoint, Wis.; St. Paul and Town Dallas congregations, Ridgeland, Wis; Trinity, Hendricks, Minn.; St. Paul, Town Argo, S.D.; St. John, Bowdle, S.D., Grace, Hot Springs, S.D.; and Good Shepherd, Midland, Tex. In retirement, he served Our Redeemer, San Angelo, Tex.

He was preceded in death by his wife, Marjorie; one sister; and three

brothers. He is survived by one sister, one brother, two sons, and three grandchildren.

Edward O. Kionka 1924-2006

Edward Kionka was born Nov. 26, 1924, in Denmark, Wis. He died Aug. 5, 2006.

A 1945 graduate of Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn., he served St. John, Lake City, Minn.; Jordan, West Allis, Wis.; North Trinity, Milwaukee, Wis.; and St. John, Watertown, Wis.

He was preceded in death by his wife, Alila. He is survived by three sons, four daughters, 17 grandchildren, and six great-grandchildren.

Addition:

Pastor Alvin Schulz [Aug. obituaries] also served St. Paul's, Montrose/Trinity, rural Buffalo (Crawford Lake), Minn.

GOT A STORY TO TELL?

Teens, let us know what's on your mind.

We're looking for 600-word articles with a Christ-centered focus to print in **Whatever**, a *Forward in Christ* department that's written by teens for teens about teen issues.

Tell us what issues you're dealing with and how your faith helped you face them.

Share your experiences by sending your stories to **Whatever, Forward in Christ**, 2929 N Mayfair Rd, Milwaukee WI 53222.

Or you can submit stories online at www.wels.net/jump/whatever.



Whatever

READ THROUGH MY BIBLE IN 3 YEARS DECEMBER 2006

- | | |
|--------------------|---------------------|
| 1. John 17:1-5 | 17. Is. 10:5-34 |
| 2. Jn. 17:6-19 | 18. Is. 11, 12 |
| 3. Jn. 17:20-26 | 19. Is. 13:1-14:23 |
| 4. Jn. 18:1-27 | 20. Is. 14:24-16:14 |
| 5. Jn. 18:28-19:16 | 21. Is. 17, 18, 19 |
| 6. Jn. 19:17-37 | 22. Is. 20:1-22:14 |
| 7. Jn. 19:38-20:10 | 23. Is. 22:15-23:18 |
| 8. Jn. 20:11-31 | 24. Is. 24, 25 |
| 9. Jn. 21:1-14 | 25. Is. 26, 27 |
| 10. Jn. 21:15-25 | 26. Is. 28 |
| 11. Isaiah 1 | 27. Is. 29:1-30:17 |
| 12. Is. 2, 3, 4 | 28. Is. 30:18-32:20 |
| 13. Is. 5 | 29. Is. 33, 34, 35 |
| 14. Is. 6 | 30. Is. 36, 37 |
| 15. Is. 7:1-8:15 | 31. Is. 38, 39 |
| 16. Is. 8:16-10:4 | |

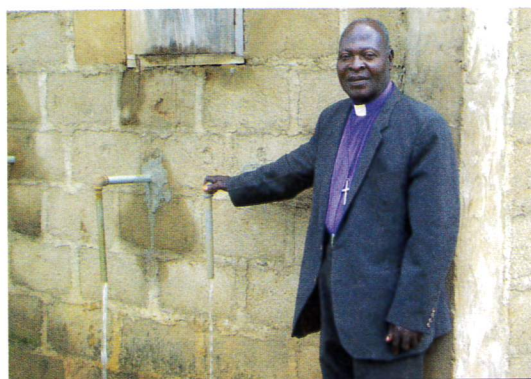
Aiding and relieving

WELS has been blessed with two important committees that assist people around the world during times when they are not able to provide for themselves. The Committee on Relief and the Humanitarian Aid Committee provide help in the United States and abroad, yet their purposes and means of aid are different.

The Humanitarian Aid Committee of the Board for World Missions, as it is formally known, works to encourage and fund projects in world mission fields that build bridges to people to proclaim the gospel to them. Digging a bore hole or deep well in Nigeria is an example of this, says Pastor Doug

Weiser, liaison to Nigeria. “The bore hole is powered by a generator. The people tell us that they start serving water at 10 A.M. each day. People come from miles for this pure water, bypassing shallower bore holes that pump foul water. The church where the bore hole is located holds a devotion in its shelter at 10 A.M. as well. After that the water is given to everyone free of charge. While people are coming to the church for water, the members are busy explaining that they give this water free of charge because of Jesus’ love.”

According to the Humanitarian Aid Committee chairman, Pastor David Valleskey, “The Humanitarian Aid Committee is meant to be a proactive committee and encourages our mission fields to think about how humanitarian aid can serve as bridges for proclaiming the gospel. We purposely ask [world missions] to plan out a year’s program. The number of projects taken on each year by the Humanitarian Aid Committee varies but usually totals about \$500,000 a year.”



Nigerian Pastor Matthias Odey stands outside his church next to a newly completed bore hole.



The Committee on Relief, in conjunction with WELS Kingdom Workers, assisted members of Crown of Life, New Orleans, La., with the gutting and rebuilding of homes after Hurricane Katrina.

Meanwhile, WELS members have often seen the WELS Committee on Relief’s name in conjunction with last year’s Hurricane Katrina disaster and the funding it provided to rebuild Crown of Life, New Orleans, La., and the houses of members. The committee’s purpose is to be the synod’s “ministry of compassion,” to bring physical relief to victims of natural disasters. The Committee on Relief by the very nature of its work is set up to move quickly and respond when time is of the essence. According to Committee on Relief chairman, Pastor Philip Schupmann, “Our committee handles the humanitarian aid outside of world missions and disaster relief needs. For instance, we assist in humanitarian aid to Native American populations, but we also provide disaster relief aid in the wake of the earthquakes in Indonesia or India.”

Both committees rely on voluntary contributions to help fund projects and aid. Both committees are administered by chairmen and boards—appointed in the case of Committee on Relief, elected by the Board for World Missions in the case of Humanitarian Aid—who receive no compensation. All of the money donated to the committees goes toward aid and relief efforts.

In the end, what is exciting is the amount of work being accomplished because of the generosity of others. Through the Humanitarian Aid Committee people who don’t know Christ are learning about him just by going and getting clean water or receiving medical treatment. Through the Committee on Relief, WELS is able to help when disaster strikes and in many cases repair and rebuild churches, homes, communities, and lives. The committees may be separate, but the work all glorifies the same Savior.

To learn more about the Humanitarian Aid Committee, watch the November edition of WELS Connection. To learn more about the WELS Committee on Relief, visit www.welsrelief.net.

Martin Luther College trains students for urban education

Martin Luther College (MLC), New Ulm, Minn., is offering an Urban Education Ministry Focus for all students interested in serving in urban settings. The program allows students to participate in field trips and to complete their early field experiences and student teaching in WELS schools in Milwaukee and Minneapolis.

Last April, 15 MLC students traveled to Lutheran elementary schools in Milwaukee—St. Marcus, Risen Savior, and Garden Homes—and to The Hope School, a Lutheran high school on Dr. Martin Luther King Drive. They observed, taught lessons, and talked to teachers and administrators about the unique challenges and blessings of teaching in urban settings.

“It was eye-opening to see the cultural differences, and yet how every student is the same no matter what,” says MLC student Anna Kieckhaefer. “All kids have the same needs—God’s Word, which is the most important thing, and also the basics of life, how to read and write—but you may have to find different ways to meet those needs. A trip like this really opens your eyes and gets your creative juices flowing.”

“Demographic trends indicate that urban settings are growing,” says Prof. Philip Leyrer, coordinator of the program. “We want to be responsive to the unique challenges of this mission field.”

In 2005, nine MLC graduates were assigned to urban schools. Nine more were assigned in 2006, and two additional grads were hired as teaching assistants.

Praising God through the arts

Soli Deo Gloria. That is the name of an institute begun in Milwaukee in 2002 to promote the use of the arts in worship. It means to God alone be the glory. “The most important thing we do as Christians is worship our God,” explains Dr. Patricia Backhaus, the instigator of Soli Deo Gloria. “Everything we do is centered on this principle. It is a response from us for being saved by grace through faith. Our traditions as Lutheran Christians include a great deal of music. We encourage [students from] grade school through college, but what happens after that? Do we still encourage musicians, painters, writers and composers? Their gifts and talents are so valuable for building up the church. Those who work in the arts can share their talents through extraordinary worship.”

The Soli Deo Gloria (SDG) Institute has developed over the last five years through the volunteer work of Backhaus and several of her talented friends and colleagues: Valerie Floeter, Karen Lippert, Richard Mannisto, and Matthew Schlomer. The cornerstone of the organization has been the SDG Brass. Groups of brass players from a list of 140 (most are from Milwaukee, but 10 states and three countries are represented) play for worship services

and events such as benefit concerts. SDG Brass has given many musicians an outlet through which to praise the Lord and has inspired at least three congregations to start their own brass groups.

The next goal of Soli Deo Gloria was to develop a Summer Band and Fine Arts Camp. This camp has encouraged young people in musical, visual, and performance arts for three years now. Once the brass group and camp were working well, inquiries from other musicians led to the Woodwind Festival, SDG Choir, Town Square Band, and WELS Symphonic Band. What will be next? Chancel dramas? Visual artwork for churches? Liturgical dance or even a dance company dedicated to using their gifts to the glory of God?

Looking toward the future, Backhaus sees Soli Deo Gloria as a resource for WELS congregations both locally and eventually globally. “In an age where media and fast everything dominate,” Backhaus reflects, “the arts have the ability to focus us all on more meaningful things. They heighten our joys and soften our sorrows. They give each of us a very real connection with our Lord.”

To learn more about Soli Deo Gloria or to contact Backhaus, visit www.solideogloriainstitute.org.



(L to r) Al Schumacher, Marty Kuphall, and Dan Ericson, members of Soli Deo Gloria Brass, rehearse outdoors at Zion, South Milwaukee, for a concert that benefited Calvary Academy in Milwaukee and Martin Luther Schule in Zwickau-Planitz, Germany.

WELS news briefs

Commission on Special Ministries 414-256-3241; csm@sab.wels.net

The WELS Military Services Committee of the Commission on Special Ministries hosted a **regional civilian chaplain training conference** for WELS civilian chaplains from west of the Mississippi in San Diego, Calif., in November. This conference was to help civilian chaplains learn how to better serve WELS members and others serving in the military. Another regional civilian chaplaincy conference is being planned for 2007.

In September, Pastor Paul Ziemer, a member of the Military Services Committee, returned to Kuwait to minister to as many American soldiers as he could. In addition to ministering to WELS people in the military, Ziemer worked to establish relationships that will enhance the synod's ability to serve WELS troops in the future. Ziemer has traveled to Kuwait several times on behalf of the Commission on Special Ministries. You can refer names to the Commission on Special Ministries for follow-up at www.wels.net/jump/refer.

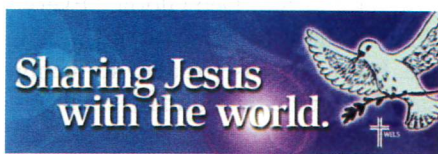
Board for Ministerial Education 414-256-3236; bme@sab.wels.net

More than 300 pastors, professors, and seminary students attended the **Fall Symposium on Christian vocation at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis.**, in September. Speakers for the event were Pastor Steven Degner, Star of Bethlehem, Santa Maria, Calif.; Prof. Kenneth Cherney, seminary faculty member; and Prof. Mark Paustian of Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn.

This annual Fall Symposium is held to bring together pastors and seminary professors and students for worship, fellowship, and the study of topics that are timely in the life of the church. Next year's symposium, scheduled for Sept. 17-18, 2007, will focus on stewardship training in WELS congregations.

More information on the seminary's Fall Symposium, including the presentations on Christian vocation, is available at www.wls.wels.net.

Commission on Evangelism 414-256-3287; evangelism@sab.wels.net



The Commission on Evangelism has developed a **media program** under the theme "Sharing Jesus with the world" to help congregations communicate to the people in their community. The program includes a print ad campaign, a coordinated postcard, a 60-second radio spot, and an outdoor banner. All these pieces can be customized to include specific congregational information. To learn more about this program, go to www.wels.net/jump/mediaprogram.

Commission on Youth Discipleship 414-256-3224; cyd@sab.wels.net



More than 80 pastors, teachers, staff ministers, and laypeople from 10 of the 12 WELS districts attended the **second biennial Youth Ministry Conference** in Scottsdale, Ariz., in September. The conference focused

on the importance of the gospel ministry to youth and families. The theme, "Building from the ground up," was seen in the three keynote addresses: "The family is foundational," "Parents are primary," and "Youth matter." Conference presentations can be found at www.wels.net/youthdiscipleship.

Technology 414-256-3250; martin.spriggs@sab.wels.net

More than 250 WELS congregations are using **WELS' Web hosting and content management solution** for their church Web site. The WELS Technology office partnered with FinalWeb in 2005 to provide WELS organizations an easy-to-use Web site tool that includes professionally designed templates. The tool is available for \$21 a month. Find out more about this tool at www.wels.net/jump/webhosting.



WELS members now are able to take advantage of lower prices in office products from Office Depot through **ShopWELS, the synodwide purchasing program**. This program also allows WELS congregations, organizations, and individuals to receive discounts in computer hardware and software, telecommunications, and copiers. To find out more about what's available, go to www.shopwels.net.

CORRECTIONS

There are two corrections to the "District convention wrap-up" [Sept., pp. 20,21].

- Pastor John Steinbrenner of Boise, Idaho, not Pastor Thomas Unke, was elected as first vice president of the Pacific Northwest District.
- The North Atlantic District did not accept and pass the restructuring proposal. It, instead, resolved that the administrative structure be kept the way it is; recommended that the Board for Home Missions and the Board for World Missions remain separate boards; and expressed concerns over boards and committees becoming advisory to the area of ministry administrators.

“Can you see me now?”

Using a free piece of software called Skype and a few inexpensive computer accessories, talking to a world missionary face to face in real time became a reality for the members at Atonement, Plano, Texas.

Missionary Kevin Stellick in Taiwan is a mission partner for our congregation. Congregation members support the work in Taiwan through prayers and special offerings. After becoming familiar with Skype and what it can do, we decided that it would be a won-

derful way to bring the Taiwan mission closer to the members of Atonement.

The set-up required high-speed Internet, a microphone, and a Web cam on both ends. With this as well as some advance communication and scheduling, the video conversation became as simple as the click of a mouse.

Stellick and his wife, Sarah, joined us at 9 A.M. Texas time (10 P.M. Taiwan time). Our moderator wore a headset microphone and asked questions the congregation had submitted the previous week as well as questions that came in from the floor as the talk progressed.

We learned how the number of WELS missionaries in Taiwan has dropped from five to one in recent years. Despite cuts, we learned how mission work there continues—how two Taiwanese men are currently training in Mequon with hopes that they will return to serve the church in Taiwan. We learned about some of the obstacles to mission work in Taiwan. We

learned about Buddhism, Taoism, and especially ancestor worship. But we also learned that the Taiwanese people are kind, open, and willing to discuss Christianity. We learned how Sarah uses the same witnessing tools in Taiwan that we can use here—she befriends people who need to hear about Jesus and spends time with them to build bridges for evangelism. Sarah also gave us some insights into everyday life in Taiwan.

When we asked how we could help to further the work in Taiwan, Stellick and his wife asked us to pray for the members and workers there as well as the huge numbers of people yet to be reached. But most of all, they asked us to get involved in sharing Christ right here in Plano because a broader mission mindset here in Plano and in each church throughout the United States can only lead to increased blessings and prayers for the servants of Christ in Taiwan and throughout the world.

Joanne Nemmers

Learn more about the Mission Partners program at www.wels.net/jump/mission-partners.



Missionary Kevin Stellick and his wife Sarah participated in a video conversation with members at Atonement, Plano, Texas, in September. The congregation and the Stellicks were on Skype for 85 minutes with video and audio.

LET YOUR LIGHT SHINE

This summer, Shirley and Jerry Dorst, members of Trinity, Minocqua, Wis., sent an e-mail to friends to let them know that Shirley was losing her battle with cancer. Rather than be upset with her condition, she used the e-mail as a chance to share her faith. Below is an excerpt from that e-mail.

... So now I begin on the last leg of my journey home. Jerry and I have begun calling it “packing for heaven.” How do I feel about this? Well, the weak human part of me is a little scared, and I don’t want to go. But then I remember where I’m going. I will be in heaven with my Lord, and he has promised me that I will be in bliss. And when I think of this, I can actually get excited about going. I am also grateful for the time God has granted me.

Sometimes people have said to me, “You’ve been through so much,” but I don’t feel that way. In the bad moments I tell Jerry, “I’m sick of all of this.” But I do remember that my God is in control and that “all things must work together for good to those who love God.”

He may be using all of this to draw Jerry or me (or you) closer to him. Whatever his reason, I am content.

Last night Jerry and I went to Rhineland for the vesper service, and, as we left, Pastor Sternberg said, “I hope you can come back and visit again, but if not I’ll see you in heaven.” That’s what I want to say to all of you. Whether I am here for months or if I die this evening, I hope to see all of you in heaven.

May God bless all of you,
Shirley

Ed’s note: Shirley died on Aug. 28.

What's a VEBA?

Forward in Christ recently spoke with Jon Flanagan, director of benefit plans, to find out exactly what WELS VEBA is and what it means for our congregations.

What exactly is WELS VEBA?

ANSWER – The Voluntary Employees' Beneficiary Association plan is an employee benefit plan that was established for called workers and some lay workers at varying sponsoring organizations [congregations, schools, WELS affiliates, etc.]. It was established in 1984 as a self-insured plan. In 1986 it became self-administrated until January 2005 when it moved to a third-party claim management service.

What does VEBA do?

ANSWER – The plan provides consistent benefits for all WELS workers. It assures the worker that wherever they go, they have the same benefit plan available to them. For the sponsoring organization it provides a way to provide good, solid benefit plans for their workers without the fear of being cancelled by commercial underwriters. Our plan doesn't base premium rates and eligibility on individual factors such as health, gender, and age.

What are the benefits that are included in VEBA?

ANSWER – The plan includes a comprehensive medical plan, and included with that is long-term disability coverage for the worker. It also provides life insurance benefits for the worker and their spouse. The plan also has ancillary benefits such as dental, optional group term life, and option long-term disability for those who might be eligible but are covered under another healthcare plan.

Would you say that VEBA rates tend to be lower than the national average?

ANSWER – Over the last five to seven years, we've kept our increases at, or just below, the medical trends in comparison to other plans like ours. It is a continuing challenge given that our workforce is continuing to skew a little older

now. In general, that means higher healthcare costs and higher utilizations. The challenge will be how we manage those costs in the future.

You mention age being a challenge. What are some other challenges facing VEBA?

ANSWER – Healthcare tends to be a regional-based cost factor. The challenge for us is to provide a national plan across all regions but still stay competitive. While there are places where commercial insurance may be somewhat less costly, the big challenge for our sponsoring organizations is to make sure the benefits match the worker and not just focus on the costs of premiums.

What do you say to congregations that feel they can find a better plan?

ANSWER – They need to diligently explore. What I do ask them to do is compare all the factors. That includes cost as well as benefits. Our office tries to work with them as closely as possible to help them make those comparisons. Many times when congregations call me, they don't even realize the benefits that are available to their workers under the plan.

What are some new things that are being looked at for the future?

ANSWER – One of the things that the plan is going to have to look at very closely is disease management and wellness benefits to help contain long-term healthcare costs. We'll be looking at that with our current carrier, Blue Cross/Blue Shield, and with our outside consultants to provide the types of programs that have not been available in the past.

To find out more about WELS VEBA, go to www.welsbpo.net.

ON THE BRIGHT SIDE

One of the children at our preschool was coloring a picture of the symbols of baptism. When his parents asked him to explain what he had colored, he replied: "The Holy Dove, the Holy Clam, and the Holy Drips."

Marlis Kremer
Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

After Sunday school one Sunday, I asked my four-year-old son Grant about the story they had learned that day. Here's the exchange:

Grant: "It was about Jesus and Peter walking on the water."

Mom: "Oh, and what happened?"

Grant: "Peter began to sink."

Mom: "Did he sink because he didn't trust in Jesus?"

Grant: "No, because he wasn't wearing a life jacket."

Holly Wempner
East Brunswick, New Jersey

District news

Dakota-Montana



On Aug. 19, Mount Zion, Missoula, Mont., held its third annual Friendship Festival in a local park. The festival consisted of a concert by the Christian band, Koine, a free BBQ, and games and activities for kids. About 115 people attended with about 30 or so visitors.

Happy anniversary!

MI—Catherine Felsing, a teacher at Peace, Ostego, Mich., celebrated her 25th anniversary in the ministry on Oct. 1.

SEW—On Sept. 23, **St. John's, Wauwatosa, Wis.**, celebrated its one-year anniversary of having Chinese worship services with a special service and a Chinese-American potluck.

Dakota-Montana

The **WELS Student Fellowship at South Dakota State University** took advantage of Orientation Day at the university in August. College students and others manned a booth and handed out more than 1,000 Frisbee discs, pencils, or rulers with the www.WhatAboutJesus.com Web site imprinted. This meant that about one in every 12 students at the university received information about this outreach Web site. Those same Frisbee discs and pencils, along with copies of *Meditations*, were also distributed at the South Dakota State Fair on Labor Day weekend. Names of individuals who wanted more information about WELS were referred to the closest WELS church.

Southeastern Wisconsin

In September, **Peace, Hartford, Wis.**, sold between two to three acres of

land adjacent to its church property to Wisconsin Lutheran Child & Family Service for the construction of an assisted living facility. Much of the proceeds from the sale will be directed to the congregation's "Building the Vision" expansion, which includes improved handicapped accessibility, space for fellowship and Bible study at the church, office space for pastoral staff, and a preschool & kindergarten wing to be added to its school building.

Northern Wisconsin

Calvary, Sheboygan, Wis., dedicated its new sanctuary on Oct. 1. Included in the dedication was a special Hmong language sanctuary. Tours and a meal followed the service.

ABC's "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition" is featuring **Christine Koepke and her family**, members at Trinity, Dundee, Wis. Using a team of designers, contractors, and hundreds of volunteers, "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition" builds designer homes in seven day's time for deserving families. The show draws 17 to 20 million

Minnesota



In August, a tornado hit the Nicollet and St. Peter area in Minnesota. Six families from St. Peter, St. Peter, had their homes destroyed or major damage to their properties. Five families had some damage. Two families from Trinity, Nicollet, Minn., had minor damage to their properties. Students and professors from Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn., and Bethany Lutheran College (ELS), Mankato, Minn., helped with cleanup in the area (pictured above). The WELS Committee on Relief has given \$15,000 to help with clean-up.

viewers a week. The show is scheduled to air on Sunday, Nov. 19.

These pastors are the reporters for the districts featured this month: DM—Wayne Rouse; MI—John Eich; MN—Jeffrey Bovee; NW—Joel Lillo; SEW—Scott Oelhafen.

DEFINING RELIGION

Spiritually dead: to be without spiritual life, to be without faith, to be an unbeliever. Every human being is born spiritually dead and must be born again to enter the kingdom of God. People are born again spiritually when they are converted, when the Holy Spirit creates faith in their hearts through the means of grace.

CHANGES IN MINISTRY

Pastors

Ehlert, Joel T., to retirement
 Hirsch, Paul A., to St. John, Juneau, Wis.
 Kutz, Thomas C., to retirement
 Meier, Dennis W., to Mt. Zion, Ripon, Wis.
 Runke, William E., to St. John, Pardeeville, Wis.
 Schroeder, John P., to retirement
 Seager, Paul M., Henry County, McDonough, Ga.

Teachers

Aita, Gloria J., to Cross of Glory, Washington, Mich.
 Burgess, Rachel L., to Lamb of God, West Allis, Wis.
 Mickelson, Linda J., to St. Mark's, Watertown, Wis.
 Schuessler, Paul M., to St. Marcus, Milwaukee, Wis.
 Sievert, Scott R., to St. John, St. Paul, Minn., and St. Croix LHS, West Saint Paul, Minn.

Additional assignments

Additional calls/assignments have been made since the assignment services at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and Martin Luther College in May. To see a list for Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, go to www.wls.wels.net and click on "Assignment update." To see a list for Martin Luther College, go to www.mlc-wels.edu/home/academics/resources/assignments/.

NOTICE FOR CONGREGATION TREASURERS

The cutoff date for Congregation Mission Offering receipts in the synod's post office lock box is the last business day of each month. December 2006 offerings sent to our lock box will be credited as 2006 receipts through Jan. 9, 2007, as long as they are received in the lock box on or before that date and are clearly labeled as "December" offerings on the remittance coupon. We ask that you continue to mail your offerings to the lock box. That location, our bank, will provide you with the fastest deposit process for your congregation.

Todd Poppe, chief financial officer

SYNOD CONVENTION

The 59th biennial convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod will be held July 30-Aug. 3, 2007, at Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn. The convention delegate fee, usually paid by the congregation the delegate represents, is \$175.

Memorials may be submitted anytime before the 2007 convention begins. A memorial—usually composed in the format of "whereas" and "resolved"—is a formal petition to the synod convention that asks consideration for a particular item of busi-

ness. Memorials to be included in the *Book of Reports and Memorials* need to be submitted to the President's Office by Feb. 1, 2007. Send memorials to President's Office, 2929 N Mayfair Rd, Milwaukee WI 53222; carla.martin@sab.wels.net.

CALL FOR NOMINATIONS

The Synod Nominating Committee will meet at the synod administration building on Jan. 3 and 4, 2007. The committee will propose three candidates for each of the following positions:

- Synodical Council: pastor-at-large (pastor)
- Synod Board of Appeals: chairman (pastor); three board members (one layman, two pastors)
- Board for Ministerial Education: two board members (one layman, one area Lutheran high school representative)
- Luther Preparatory School Governing Board: chairman (parish pastor)
- Michigan Lutheran Seminary Governing Board: chairman (parish pastor)
- Board for World Missions: chairman (parish pastor) and member-at-large (layman)
- Board for World Missions administrative committee members: Latin American (pastor, teacher); Native American (pastor, layman); Africa (pastor, layman); Japan Europe Asia (pastor, teacher); Southeast Asia (pastor)
- Board for Home Missions: chairman (parish pastor)
- Commission on Evangelism: chairman
- Commission on Parish Schools: chairman
- Board for Parish Services: teacher member
- Northwestern Publishing House Board of Directors: three board members (one layman, one parish pastor, one Martin Luther College professor)

Descriptions of these positions are available at www.wels.net/jump/nc. Any synod voting member is invited to send names with pertinent information by Dec. 10, 2006, to Pastor Robert Pasbrig, 876 Fairview Dr, Hartford WI 53027. Or you can fill out the online form at www.wels.net/jump/nomform. The list of candidates nominated will be posted online by May 15, 2007, at www.wels.net/convention. The delegates will elect one candidate for each position at the synod convention on July 30-Aug. 3, 2007.

ANNIVERSARIES

Watertown (Richwood), Wis.—St. Mark (100). Nov. 19. Service, 10:15 A.M. Clint Burow, 920-262-0327.

COMING EVENTS

Joint Reformation services organized by local chapters of WELS Kingdom Workers:

- Greater Milwaukee Area Chapter—Oct. 29, 3 P.M., with light refreshments to follow. Wisconsin LHS, Milwaukee.
- Minnesota Valley Chapter—Oct. 29, 2:30 P.M., with lunch to follow. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn.
- La Crosse Coulee Region Chapter—Nov. 5, 3 P.M., St. Paul, Onalaska, Wis.
- Mid-America Chapter—Oct. 29, 4 P.M., with lunch to follow. Mt. Olive, Overland Park, Kan.
- Dallas/Fort Worth Chapter—Nov. 5, 4 P.M., with lunch to follow. Immanuel, Fort Worth, Tex.
- Valley of the Sun Chapter—Oct. 29, 4 P.M., with meal to follow. Arizona Lutheran Academy, Phoenix, Ariz.

Capitol Area Christian Women's Retreat—Nov. 4. Peace, Sun Prairie, Wis. \$20 adult/\$10 teen. Sheree Matkce, 920-484-3271; sheree100@centurytel.net.

Concert—The Lutheran Chorale of Milwaukee, Nov. 26; 3 & 7 P.M. Atonement, Milwaukee, Wis. Mary Prange, 414-873-9105.

Women's Retreat—Feb. 23-25, 2007. Paradise Shores, Holcombe, Wis. Hosted by St. Mark, Eau Claire, Wis. Rebekah Carey, rebekahcarey@sbcglobal.net.

Christian Woman Today Retreat—March 23-25, 2007. Olympia Resort, Oconomowoc, Wis. Maureen Sertich, 262-784-0412.

WELS Regional Handbell Festivals—

- April 21-22, 2007. Host, St. Peter, Schofield, Wis.; site, D.C. Everst Junior High School, Schofield, Wis.
- April 21-22, 2007. Host, Peace, Hartford, Wis.; site, Kettle Moraine Lutheran High School, Jackson, Wis.
- April 14-15, 2007. Host, Salem, Loretto, Minn.; site, West Lutheran High School, Plymouth, Minn.

A concert will be held at 2 P.M., on each of the respective Sundays. Kim Pilz, kim@tomah.com or visit www.welsbells.com.

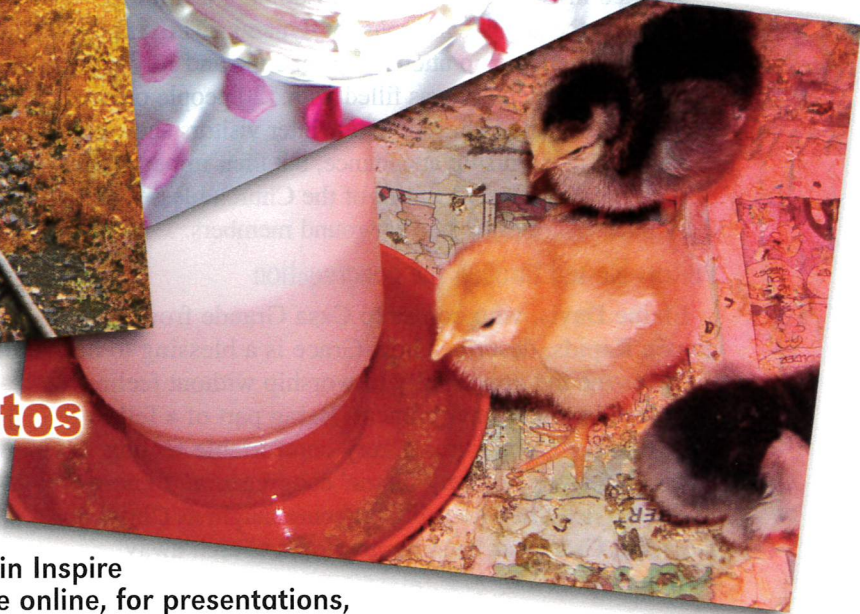
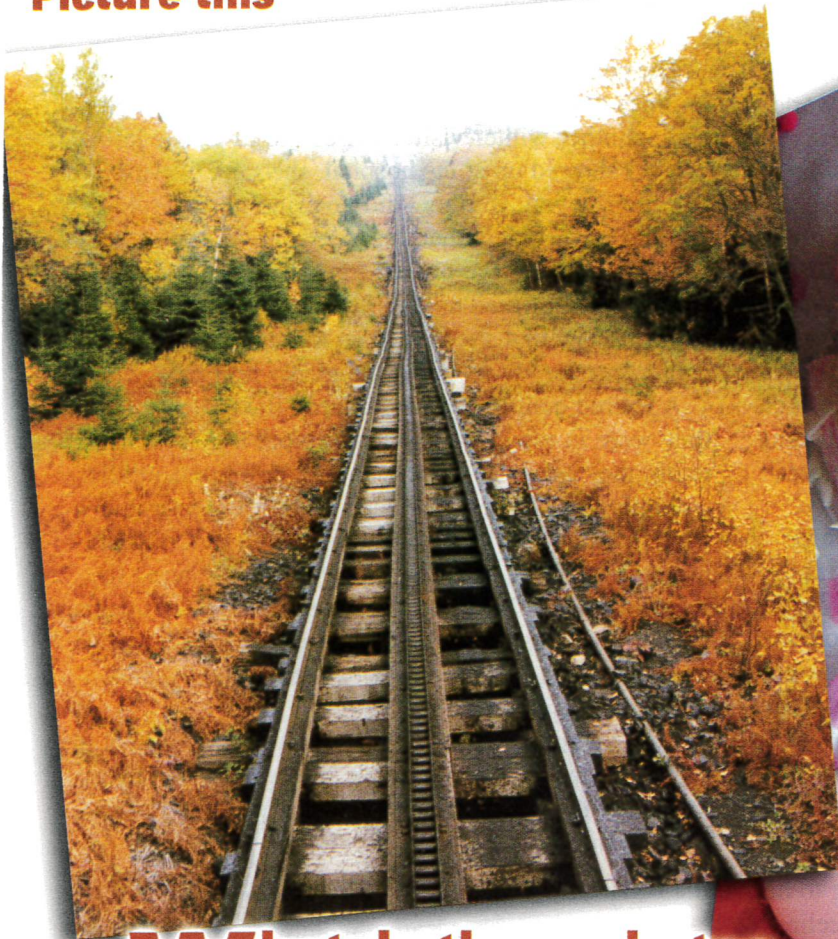
Women of WELS Retreat—April 20-22, 2007. Willow Valley Resort and Conference Center, Lancaster, Penn. Eileen Bartels Hadden, 703-430-8873; wow3@stjohnsde.org.

2007 Grand Alaska Escorted Land Tour—sponsored by Camp Phillip. June 15-24, 2007. Ten-day tour featuring Anchorage, Valdez, Fairbanks, Denali National Park, Mt. McKinley, Alaska railroad, and glacier cruise. Marcus Buch, 920-478-2937.

NAMES WANTED

Soldiers and families at Fort Drum, N.Y., or Binghamton, N.Y. region—Jeremiah Gumm, 315-622-2843.

To place an announcement, call 414-256-3210; bulletinboard@sab.wels.net. Deadline is eight weeks before publication date. An updated bulletin board is available at www.wels.net/jump/bulletinboard.



What do these photos have in common?

They all come from Inspire, an art gallery on WELS Web site. All photos and other art work in Inspire are royalty free and can be downloaded to use online, for presentations, or in print materials that are not for profit. As a donating artist, your gift of artwork should lend itself to sharing Christ but may or may not be of religious nature. Each month Inspire will be asking visitors to submit photos toward a different category in the gallery. The best submitted photo will be showcased on the monthly theme page.

So whether you're seeking to share your art or to borrow from others, visit www.wels.net/jump/inspire.

Comfort from God's Word

Often in this age we receive e-mails or greeting cards with inspirational quotes from famous and not-so-famous people. As moving and even biblical as these sayings may be, the advice and comfort found in God's Word is always superior.

"I don't know the secret to success, but the key to failure is to try to please everyone."—Bill Cosby

"No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other."—Matthew 6:24

"I have held many things in my hands and lost them all; but the things I have placed in God's hands, those I always possess."
—Joyce Earline Steelburg

"... I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day."
—2 Timothy 1:12

"People don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care ... about them."—Zig Ziglar.

"If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move moun-

tains, but have not love, I am nothing."
—1 Corinthians 13:2

"You are never so high as when you are on your knees."—Jean Hodges
"Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up."—James 4:10

"You may give without loving, but you cannot love without giving."
—Glen Wheeler

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life."—John 3:16

A short time after my arrival in Casa Grande, Ariz., someone told me that this is the hardest place in the world to be a pastor. He explained, "In winter, the weather is so wonderful that no one thinks about going to heaven. In summer, it is so hot that no one is afraid of hell."

Even though this joke almost certainly is older than I am, it illustrates that the seasonal climate changes affect the way of life, even church life, in central Arizona. Many retirees from the cold North enjoy a winter trip to Casa Grande to escape the snow. The average high temperature for January is 66 degrees. In addition to the climate, area attractions cater to retirees and other vacationers, making it a prime location for winter visitors to enjoy whether they're here for a few weeks or several months.

Located in Casa Grande, Grace Lutheran Church is affected by the area's winter-visitor dynamic. The current year's average worship attendance for June and July was 50, while the sanctuary was filled with 120 people on average in January and February. The winter visitors show up in statistics like worship attendance, but their impact goes beyond the numbers. The Lord of the Church blesses both the winter visitors and the year-round members.

Visitors blessed through the congregation

Elaine Davis, who comes to Casa Grande from Wisconsin Rapids, describes how Grace is a blessing to her. "It gives me the opportunity to worship without feeling displaced in a new environment. Being part of a fellow Christian congregation is a very comfortable feeling when I am away from my 'home' congregation. I know I will still hear the Word of God being taught as Christ intended. Grace has become my home church away from home."

The congregation can be a blessing to winter visitors in times of crisis, too. When one woman was hospitalized, another winter visitor called me to let me know. When I showed up at the hospital, she said, "Pastor, it is good to see you. But how did you find out?" I told her that the caring friend had informed me. We opened the Bible. We talked. We prayed for healing according to God's will. I offered to give her home pastor a call to let him know that she was ill so that her home church could pray for her as well. She gladly accepted.

A retired couple attended church the two months they were in town. The Sunday before they returned north, they asked to speak with me for a moment after worship. "Retirement has been stressful on our marriage, Pastor. We thought that wintering in the South might help. Well, vacation didn't help, but being in church here did. We know God wants us to stay together. He still has blessings planned for our marriage. If we winter in Casa Grande next year, it will be because this church is here."

Even away from home, Christians need the gospel in Word and sacrament to grow in the faith. Grace strives to fill that need for everyone who chooses to winter in Casa Grande.

The congregation blessed through winter visitors

Year-round member Karen Schmidt sees many ways that God uses winter visitors to bless the congregation. "We benefit from their experience as members of other WELS churches of various sizes. They bring information and ideas about programs in their home congregations. I look forward to fellowship hour after worship because the winter visitors' life experiences have given them a

Temporary winter residents gather to hear the gospel and help the congregations they visit.

Steven W. Wagenknecht

ILLUSTRATION: JIM STARR



HEADING SOUTH FOR

wealth of knowledge that families with young children and teenagers can learn from.”

Winter visitors who attend worship at Grace provide a fine example for the year-round members. These are Christians whose faith life is important enough that they make a point of attending worship regularly when they are on vacation. Some even choose to winter in the Casa Grande area because there is a WELS church in the area.

Every winter, I look forward to reacquainting myself with returning winter visitors because of their positive impact on the congregation. I know that one man who stays from November through April will say something like, “Pastor, you know that if you even get in a pinch and you need an usher when I’m here, you can call on me. I don’t want to take the job away from your regulars. But I’d be happy to serve God and usher when you need me.” This is the same man who walks with the evangelism committee every spring to put Easter invites on doors, accompanies hymns on occasion with his tuba, and even cleans windows on work day.

Winter visitors help in many areas of ministry, like designing and building the congregation’s float in the city’s annual Christmas light parade. When Grace’s evangelism committee unknowingly planned its Easter for Kids on the same Saturday as the city Parks and Recreation department’s “Itty Bitty Olympics,” we were able to cancel Easter for Kids without giving up on the outreach. The city gave us permission to set up craft tables in the mini-Olympic village where children could make a free Easter craft. Winter visitors helped to staff the tables, encouraging parents to register on a mailing list for invitations to future activities like Sunday school and vacation Bible school.

Winter visitors also make a positive financial impact. Some

Are you traveling this winter?

Grace, Casa Grande, Ariz., is not the only destination for winter visitors. WELS churches in Texas, Florida, and other southern states also are blessed by these travelers. But if you venture south for the winter or are even just going on vacation, how can you easily find a WELS church to attend?

The synod Yearbook is one solution, but the WELS Locator offers another. This easy-to-use online service can help you find WELS churches all over the country. Just enter your travel destination, and the Locator will give you maps and simple directions to the churches in that area.

Find the WELS Locator online at www.wels.net/locator.

continue to support their home church while attending Grace. Others request offering envelopes in order to conscientiously support the local ministry while they are in town. Whatever the case, we are just happy to serve them with the gospel.

In his grace, God has blessed the congregation with year-round members and winter visitors who have worked together to pay off the congregation’s debt on Grace’s 10-year-old church building. Being debt free has positioned the congregation to tackle new ministry opportunities that the Lord is presenting. Additional educational space is needed as Sunday school classes are crowded. A building committee has been formed, and an elementary school or early childhood program is being considered. Outreach to Spanish speakers through English classes is also a possibility.

On which new ministry opportunities will the full-time members and winter visitors at Grace be following through this winter? We welcome you to come south and see for yourself, especially if you need a break from the snow.

Steven Wagenknecht is pastor at Grace, Casa Grande, Arizona.



Moving away

Jesus watches over his believers on secular campuses too.

James Goldschmidt

The packet arrived in April of my senior year in high school—April Fools’ Day, in fact—and I thought that perhaps someone was playing a cruel joke. The cover letter said I’d been accepted to Harvard University, one of over 20,000 applicants for a place in a class of 1,650.

As I thought back to the winter of that year and the process of my college search, I thought the news was too good to be true. I had entered a lottery in which the stakes were high and the chances of success were slim. I had another school lined up as a backup, a well-respected school much closer to home. Yet God in his wisdom had other plans for me, and within a few months I had chosen to attend this university that had chosen me, for better or for worse.

Harvard is great

I spoke with many people who seemed to take sides with “for worse.” After all, Harvard doesn’t exactly have a reputation for godliness. But let me share something that may shock you: I love Harvard—I really, truly love it.

Contrast this with the exclamations I’ve heard all too often—“You must hate it there!” or “How difficult it must be for you!”—and you’ve got the makings for a bit of head scratching. Most perceive the Harvard environment as a place in which a Christian can hardly be expected to survive, much less thrive. When I shared my decision with friends at church, I expected the same reactions I had seen among friends at my public high school: excitement, perhaps disbelief. But what I saw in the eyes of my Christian friends was something different: certainly discomfort, possibly fear. They were worried that I would lose Jesus. After even one year in such an environment, would I ever come back the same?

Of course, one year of college is enough to change anyone, but I think that any growth that’s occurred in my life over the past year has been no different than what we all go through at some point. It’s more the result of seeing the world as it truly is than of attending a liberal university. I’ve learned, for example, that many people are just selfish and unkind, and there’s nothing to do about it. I’ve also learned that, though I may live in many homes

throughout life, I’ll always miss the one I left for school.

Truth and relativism

Even in terms of my faith, being a Christian at Harvard is not as intrepid as some have made it out to be. I’m by no means the lone Christian battling it out in a barren spiritual wasteland. In fact, many of the comments I’ve heard about this university are untrue. Harvard isn’t a spiritual vacuum where faith goes to die. It is possible to live openly as a Christian without losing the respect of peers.

Ironically, Harvard is a place where challenging someone’s faith will earn you a dirty look, though not for the reasons that you may think. The biggest challenge to my faith at Harvard has not been persecution, but acceptance. You see, the most scandalous thing one can do at a place like Harvard is *judge*.

Somewhere in its 370-year history, Harvard’s Latin motto was reduced from *Veritas, Christo et Ecclesiae* (“Truth, for Christ and the Church”) to its first component, *Veritas*. As my dad pointed out to me, Pontius Pilate didn’t recognize the truth two millenia ago; today, Harvard (slightly younger) remains no exception. Logic is the closest anyone can seem to come, and, of course, Christianity has no place within the framework of logic.

In addition to logic, many at Harvard are deeply in love with self. Of all places, people at this school are most likely to think they’ve climbed to the heights of academia all by themselves. At one of the top-ranked schools in the nation, these students fill their emptiness with the same faith in self that probably got them there in the first place, which only leads to devastation when failure strikes.

But if love of logic and self are gears in Harvard’s academic machinery, then relativism is the oil that allows them to turn smoothly. Relativism is the belief that there is no absolute truth. As a result, everyone is entitled to his own individual version of the truth, provided it doesn’t challenge anyone else’s. Needless to say, the assertion that all who fail to believe in Christ will burn in hell for eternity doesn’t exactly fit into this

worldview, which is probably why the devil likes it so much. Relativism is Satan's version of a sneak attack, and the camouflage he uses is like a fog; it never fails to muddle and confuse.

Allow me to introduce my blocking group, a group of eight close friends who sign up to room together for a year. We have one Buddhist, two agnostics, three Catholics of varying fervor, one Lutheran, and one that could only be described as entirely undecided. Yet among the eight of us, we have the most calm and rational religious discussions that one could possibly imagine. Why? Because in this environment of politically correct relativism, we all respect each other's point of view. In fact, we respect every point of view because we have to. I can freely explain why my beliefs put me at peace, but I can never point out a flaw in someone else's without being deemed offensive.

As you can imagine, it can become quite difficult to lug around that sword of the Spirit when you're constantly fighting an invisible enemy. The temptation is to just set it down, along with that heavy breastplate of righteousness, because, hey, why can't we all just get along? Thank God for the gospel; it's the one source of real spiritual power in a place of foggy spiritual views. Thank God also for loving, Christian friends! If God can provide them at Harvard, he can provide them anywhere—and, as I've learned, even one special friend in the faith can make all the difference in the world. With God's help through the gospel and a few good Christian friends, we will find our way safely on our journey through life to the joy of heaven where we can discuss the greatness of his wisdom without distractions and temptations.

James Goldschmidt, a sophomore at Harvard University, is a member at Pinewood (ELS), Burlington, Massachusetts.



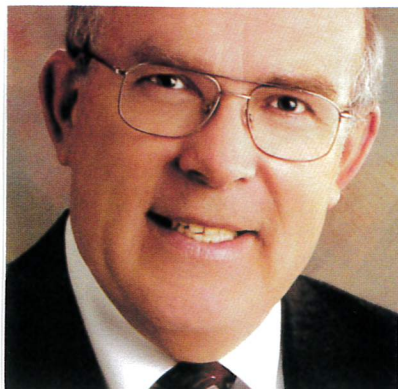
PHOTOS: MZIKO LAPASHVILI

Forward in Christ asked James how he stays strong in his faith. Here's what he says:

"For me, faith 'maintenance' is something with which I need to be creative. For example, getting to church requires a ride in the subway and further travel by car. But this effort makes me much more mindful of what it is I'm doing. . . .

"The people at Pinewood are the warmest you could imagine—always offering to help in any way imaginable, and always willing to include me in their community. A group of the young people in the congregation have regular get-togethers that I really enjoy, and it's strengthening to see this group of Christian people gathered together just to share time with others who believe what they do.

"Growth in my faith comes about most often through discussion, usually with friends who are simply curious. They raise some unique and original objections, and, when I can't provide an answer, searching the pages of Scripture is the best way to find one. So every time I'm blessed with a chance to share my faith, I'm also given the opportunity to increase my own knowledge of God's Word."



Carl R. Gungl

Jesus, Priceless Treasure

What Thanksgiving pictures come quickly to mind? How about the first Thanksgiving, with some pilgrims and some Native Americans, each in their traditional dress, enjoying a bountiful meal. Or do you remember seeing a Norman Rockwell painting entitled, "Freedom from Want"? It displays Grandmother placing a steaming platter of turkey on a large dining room table with extended family gathered around.

It would almost seem that it can't be Thanksgiving without food. Not that it's wrong to be grateful for our earthly blessings. Martin Luther, in his explanation to the First Article, gives us an outline of temporal things for which to be grateful: "Clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, spouse and children, land, cattle and all I own."

That's a good start for being truly thankful. But is it the end? Again it's Luther who shows us the better way.

Just about this time of the year, on Reformation Sunday, you may have sung Luther's hymn, "Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice" (*Christian Worship* 377). Can you relate to verse 2?

"Fast bound in Satan's chains I lay;
Death brooded darkly o'er me.
Sin was my torment night and day;
In sin my mother bore me.
Yet deep and deeper still I fell;
Life had become a living hell,
So firmly sin possessed me."

Those who think of sin but lightly would suggest that Luther is being overly dramatic. His tormenting conscience, they conclude, is an anachronism, a relic from the past. A benevolent God, they say, wouldn't want anyone to imagine now or to experience forever such soul-torture.

But Luther isn't wrong. He's accurately reflecting God's inspired Word. Death, both temporal and eternal, is sin's penalty.

No wonder sin troubled Luther so deeply. His original sin, inherited from his sinful parents, wasn't the end of it either. Sin incubated in his sin-ravaged flesh. Its temporal consequences and its eternal foreboding made his life a living hell.

But such a state of mind is not where the hymn ends. After one more painful verse—the description of his futile attempt at self-justification—Luther proceeds to describe God's successful rescue of lost sinners. Verse 8 is just one beautiful sample. In it, Jesus says:

"The foe shall shed my precious blood,
Me of my life bereaving.
All this I suffer for your good;
Be steadfast and believing.
Life shall from death the vict'ry win;
My innocence shall bear your sin,
And you are blest forever."

Death is still part of the scene. Jesus dies. However, since he's innocently suffering in our place, life is victorious over the grave. With our sin forgiven, we truly will be blessed forever.

If we can't appreciate how Luther felt in verse 2, one of two things is wrong. Either we've never acknowledged the damning effects of our sinfulness, or we've never heard of the pardoning efforts of Jesus Christ. If, thanks to God for the gift of faith, we've known both, then we have more than mere earthly blessings for which to thank God. Then our greatest blessing is the forgiveness of sins. Jesus, Priceless Treasure!

In church next Sunday, perhaps in preparation for the Lord's Supper, meditate on all the verses of hymn 377. Be honest with yourself. Make a list of the evidence of sin in your life. It shouldn't be hard to do. But then, trusting the works and words of Jesus, find temporal comfort and eternal peace in Jesus, your Savior. You are blest forever!

On the television show *Lost* the survivors of the plane crash refer in fearful tones to the “Others.” The Others have been on the island longer. They know all its secrets. They are able to spy on the survivors without being detected. They appear intent on eliminating the survivors. It is no wonder that the characters start to panic. They don’t know how to defeat the Others.

The Others

Christians may view terrorists as the Others threatening our survival. Governments around the globe grow more and more antagonistic to the Bible’s message that Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life. “Stop speaking his name” is the message they attempt to impose on Christians.

The Others also include the devil and his accomplices. They are so hard to detect, and they know our weaknesses. They have one, horrible objective: to eradicate Jesus’ name from the face of the earth. That means they must eliminate you.

Take heart! The Others have been trying for millennia to eradicate the name of Jesus. They can’t win. For proof of this, read Acts 4:23-31.

After helping a blind man receive his sight, Peter and John were rewarded with arrest and prison. The authorities then tried to intimidate them into never again speaking Jesus’ name. Who could blame Peter and John if a few tremors of fear overcame them?

But the only tremors we find are the tremors caused by the Holy Spirit. He moved the early Christians to unite in prayer. In this prayer we do not detect a hint of fear. Confidence in the One exhilarated them as they faced the threat of the nations. “Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One” (v. 25,26).

EVEN THOUGH THE NATIONS CONTINUE TO HARASS CHRISTIANS, WE NEED NOT BE INTIMIDATED.

The One

Herod and Pontius Pilate, the Gentiles, and the people of Israel in Jerusalem conspired against the Lord’s Anointed One. He stood alone against them. They were overmatched.

The disciples prayed, “They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen” (v. 28). God’s power and plan could not be defeated. God had already decided the outcome—the death of Christ would eradicate the curse of sin and initiate

Christ’s resurrection and his return to rule. Jesus, therefore, did not fear death. He anticipated the victory.

“Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness” (v. 29). Even though the nations continue to harass Christians, we need not be intimidated. We know God’s plan to spread the gospel cannot be stopped. Christ’s church has the power to spread the gospel with great boldness as the Holy Spirit shakes our hearts with the good news of Christ’s resurrection to rule over all.

“After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly” (v. 31). The gospel is the answer the Holy Spirit gives to our prayers. Together with the gospel the Holy Spirit fills our hearts with bold, active faith.

Rather than wringing our hands in fear of what the nations might do to us, the Holy Spirit exhilarates us with the good news of what Jesus already has done for us. We can anticipate Christ’s kingdom coming, and no one can prevent its arrival.

Don’t be afraid. Anticipating victory with Christ, speak God’s Word with great boldness.

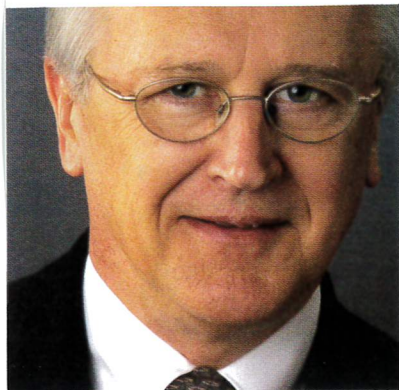
Contributing editor Philip Kieselhorst is pastor at Gethsemane, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

Next month: Lost in greed

**LOST
IN FEAR**

PHILIP L. KIESELHORST

WHEN WE ANTICIPATE VICTORY WITH CHRIST, BOLDNESS REPLACES OUR FEAR OF THE OTHERS.



John O'Brien

Thank God for thorns too

In recent history Christians in the West have celebrated Thanksgiving by counting their blessings. We are familiar with thanking God for good harvests, healthy families, good times, education, prosperity, and whatever else we can add to our list of blessings. All are great blessings from a gracious God, and we should thank him not just on Thanksgiving Day but always.

When we go through difficult times, we are not likely to feel thankful and even less likely to give thanks to God. A drought leads to crop failure; it may mean hardship. When sickness infects our lives, we may wince at the pain and discomfort. At times the road through this life is not paved smooth but more often becomes bumpy with potholes or littered with debris.

Instead of offering thanks, we grumble, whine, and complain. But God asks us to be thankful and even rejoice in our sufferings. On their way back to Antioch after the first journey, Paul and Barnabas encouraged these new believers to remain true to the faith. They said, "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22).

For a long time I only thought the passage meant that we should hold on and endure life's bumpy road. And, of course, it does mean that. But experience has taught me how the potholes have actually shaped and molded me and others. For example, many young men and women think that they are immortal and invincible. I was once one of them. How do you teach someone that they are not immortal and invincible? God has a way. He brings trouble and suffering. Slowly and sometimes painfully, young, proud, invincible believers become mature, thoughtful, humble servants. Thank God for those troubles.

The writer to the Hebrews reminds us that God disciplines those he loves. Pain and misery do not strengthen faith; they are not the means of grace. But they bring us to a crossroad. We can either turn away from God—and some have—or we can seek his strength to endure and remain faithful. By God's grace, life's troubles turn believers back to the Word and sacrament. Then God matures and deepens our faith as he drives us back to his grace. Thank God for the thorns that drive us back to the gospel.

As the years go by, God teaches us another important lesson. Sometimes the pain is sharp and quick. At other times it may be protracted. But we discover that we walk through the "valley of the shadow of death" (Psalm 23:4). On that road, we learn to treasure the promises of God more and more. We are strangers here—aliens. Thank God for the troubles that polish his promises and help us hold the perfect life in heaven so dear.

I don't like pain. I don't think any of us do. I am deeply troubled by the pain of others, and tears have streamed down my cheeks. I don't pretend to understand all the lessons God teaches with the discipline of life's trouble and pain. On occasion I even ask, "Why?" But then I return to God's manual—his Word—and trust he knows so much more than I do.

That, too, is a lesson he has taught me. I'm a limited sinful human; he is God Almighty and filled with more wisdom and love than I can imagine. He loves me; he forgave me; he wants me to live with him forever. He clearly expressed that love in Christ. If he needs to drive me back to Jesus with the thorns of life, I pray that I will have a grateful heart that can give thanks for the thorns too.



A letter of hope

Randy K. Hunter

Text summary

If you are in college writing home for money, you bring it up at the beginning of the letter and again near the end. As you near the end of a letter, you come back to the main point.

Peter again turns his attention squarely to his reason for writing:

encouragement for Christians enduring suffering for the sake of the gospel. The Jews condemned and persecuted Christians from the beginning. The Roman government initially ignored Christianity but later threw its weight into the effort to quell the Way. It got ugly and grew even uglier during the next two and a half centuries.

In the centuries since, it hasn't gotten easier. Christians in the United States and other Western countries have mostly enjoyed peaceful coexistence with the governments. But it hasn't been that way everywhere, and we would be naïve to think that it will always be that way for us. Rather than idle speculation on how we would respond under persecution, it's better to allow the Spirit of God to build our faith and the faith of our children for whatever we may face.

Scripture to read: 1 Peter 4:12-19

Scripture for memorization and meditation

"Rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ" (1 Peter 4:13).

Questions for personal study

- Praise God that you bear the name Christian. Think of ways you can remind yourself daily that you bear the name Christian.
- Create a list of the characteristics of Christ's suffering. Which of these characteristics apply to the sufferings of Christians? How do you suffer as Christ suffered?
- Peter tells us to expect suffering but reminds us to make sure we suffer for Christ and not because of our own sinfulness or foolishness. Recall an insult you've endured and ask yourself, "Was it because of Christ or because of my own weaknesses?"
- Give thanks for the religious freedoms we enjoy. Ask God to show you how to make the best use of these freedoms.

Questions for group study

- One Christian researcher, Nina Shea, claims more Christians lost their lives for their faith in the 20th century than in the previous 19 centuries combined. Does that surprise you? Why or why not?
- We don't suffer very much for being a Christian . . . at least not compared to those who have lost their lives, families, or businesses. Describe the kinds of suffering you or other believers you know have endured because of Christ.
- Peter tells believers that they are blessed if they are insulted because of Christ. Discuss how this happens today.
- As a Christian, the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. Contrast that to our seeking approval from friends, family, bosses, children, parents, and others.

Randy Hunter is pastor at St. Andrew, Middleton, Wisconsin.

This is the 11th article in a 12-part Bible study. Find this article and possible answers online. Go to www.forwardinchrist.net, and click on "A letter of hope." Answers and tips for parents with small children will be available online after Nov. 5.

Thank-you notes



Laura E. Warmuth

One special note we often overlook is the one we should address to our God.

*Dear Grandpa and Grandma,
Thank you for the birthday money.
I like it a lot. Dad made me
I put it in the bank.
Love, Laura.*

Oh, the thank-you note. What torture it seemed to sit at the dining room table after the excitement of a birthday or Christmas and write thank-you notes for all my gifts. But Mom and Dad insisted, and so I dragged my pencil along until the last trite line had been printed.

Now I'm all grown up, and I've been thinking back to all the thank-you notes I've written these 25 years. Many of them were sappy cards or e-mails to special people in my life. I'll admit it. I'm a sentimental girl. Like so many other well-intentioned people around the country, I don't want my gratitude to go unspoken, especially at Thanksgiving. But lately it occurred to me that the one who deserves my thanks the most still hasn't received his thank-you note.

I thanked my piano teacher—yes, my mom—for persistently teaching me even when I'd cried and banged on the keyboard and escaped to slam my bedroom door. I still thank her for the gift of music that she wouldn't let me pass up. But have I thanked my God for not giving up on me? He offers me a gift too. The gift of eternal life. And no matter how many times I talk back in ungratefulness and slam the door by sinning, he always forgives me and constantly leads me toward heaven.

I thanked Julie for her encouraging cards and letters that fill my "special box." How often I reach for that box when I'm feeling low. But there is a greater collection of encouraging words: letters, poems, stories, and sayings that have been passed down through many ages. Have I thanked God for his words to me in the Bible?

I thanked Kris for the way she keeps me honest and helps me see the world more clearly. I can't possibly hold back the truth when I'm talking to her, and sometimes I don't even realize how I really feel until I've said it out loud to her. But have I thanked my Heavenly Friend who sees right through me and interprets my prayers even when I can't muster any words?

I thanked every boy who ever dumped me for the roles they played in making me me and the life experiences I wouldn't have had without them. Okay, so I didn't actually write the notes, but I'm thankful, nevertheless. But have I thanked my Lord Jesus, the only one who has always been there and will ever fully understand me?

I thanked Stephanie for having the guts to give me "a swift kick in the pants" when I'm being unreasonable. A friend who points out my faults in love is invaluable. But there is someone else who curbs my behavior. He wrote his law right on my heart, and he is always behind me saying, "Now, Laura, this is the way. Walk in it." God, thank you for your law that points out when I'm being bad and for your love that moves me to be better.

I thanked Lisa for her hugs—hello and goodbye hugs, I'm here for you and I love you hugs. But have I thanked Jesus for reaching out and touching me? Every time I take communion he touches me and even gives me his blood. His touch means "I love you." It means "I forgive you." Have I thanked Jesus for this special touch?

It seems to me that I better pull up a chair to the dining room table and start a thank-you note to my God. No matter how trite or how articulate my composition, it won't suffice to thank him for his indescribable greatness. But because his Son lived for me, died for me, and rose for me, he'll accept my thanks as if it comes from Jesus' perfect lips.

Laura Warmuth is a staff writer for Forward in Christ.