



CHRIST

THROUGH US

LONG-RANGE STRATEGIC PLAN
2025–2035

WISCONSIN EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN SYNOD

September 2025



WELS' long-range strategic plan

"Christ through us"

If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. ([2 CORINTHIANS 5:17-21](#))

In these verses, St. Paul describes two precious gifts.

The first gift: *God . . . reconciled us to himself through Christ*. Reconciliation. Redemption. Restoration. In Christ, God became man so that he might lay down his perfect life as the atoning sacrifice for sin. This is Christ for us. This *"is the chief article in all Christian doctrine. Without it, the knowledge of Christ is lost"* (Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article IV).

The second: *We are . . . Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us*. Recruitment. Responsibility. Representation. God gives all believers a new and lofty purpose—sharing that message of reconciliation with others as Christ's ambassadors. This is Christ through us.

So, we celebrate these inseparable truths: *Christ for us* and *Christ through us*.

The first truth is *the message*—"the message of reconciliation"—the Holy Spirit works the saving faith through which we receive all of Christ's gifts.

The second truth is *the method*—"through us"—that Christ has chosen to share that life-giving message.

The motivation for us to embrace this "Christ through us" calling is abundantly provided in the good news of "Christ for us." In gratitude for the gracious gift of Christ's righteousness, the believers of WELS joyfully serve as Christ's ambassadors.

- We know that Christ desires that his message of reconciliation go into the whole world.
- We affirm that only that gospel of reconciliation can create and sustain faith.
- We trust that the Spirit will work through the means of grace he has entrusted to us.
- We entrust the spiritual outcomes of our work to Christ, the Lord of the Church.

With hearts full of thanksgiving, we carry out this ministry of reconciliation as individuals and as congregations united in a confessional Lutheran church body. Together, we proclaim the gospel, standing unwaveringly on the full truth of God's Word as expressed by the Lutheran Confessions. We will labor diligently, yet humbly, knowing that our efforts are but instruments in the hands of the Spirit, who alone brings life. Thus, we press forward in this sacred task—steadfast in our doctrine, bold in our witness, and ever reliant on Christ to accomplish his good work through us.

OUR PURPOSE

As we plan our shared ministry efforts and marshal resources as good stewards of God's blessings, we do so with this sense of purpose:

The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod exists to glorify God by proclaiming the truth of the Holy Scriptures as articulated in the Lutheran Confessions—supporting congregations as they equip their members to serve as Christ's ambassadors, training called workers to serve in the ministry of reconciliation, and coordinating mission efforts at home and abroad.

OUR PRIORITIES

In 2025, the people of WELS lift their hearts in gratitude to God for the 175 years of grace he has lavished upon our church body. Since 1850, Christ has mightily worked through us, his ambassadors, to share the message of reconciliation with countless souls, drawing them to his cross. Across those seven generations, we see that mankind's greatest affliction—sin—remains unchanged, as does its only remedy: the righteousness of Christ, freely bestowed through faith.

However, we also acknowledge that the world in which we carry out this sacred mission has transformed dramatically. In North America, the cultural landscape has shifted. Secularism and skepticism have surged. Increasingly, Americans dismiss faith as being irrelevant and view the church with suspicion, associating it with judgmentalism or hypocrisy. The vast majority of Christian denominations in America are declining at a pace that strains their ability to sustain ministry. WELS, too, has felt the weight of these challenges.

Yet at the same time, across the world, the Lord is opening doors wide. In regions where Christianity was once unknown or unwelcome, the gospel is taking root and flourishing. Through Word and sacrament, the Holy Spirit is drawing new believers to Christ—often in the face of opposition or persecution—building his church in ways that defy human expectation. These global opportunities remind us that the ministry of reconciliation entrusted to us is not bound by borders or eras, but is a living, Spirit-driven mission that transcends all perceived obstacles.

As WELS steps into its eighth generation, the “Christ through us” long-range strategic plan emerges as our prayerful response to these current realities. With humility before God's grace and bold confidence in his promises, we seek to navigate this shifting landscape by supporting congregations in their effort to faithfully extend the reach of the gospel locally and abroad.

This issues-based strategic plan names four strategic priorities—sweeping areas that face our gravest challenges. Each priority offers a rationale for its urgency, followed by goals—tangible steps showing how, by God’s grace, we will meet these trials. Priorities frame the struggles; goals forge the path. (Note: The order of the priorities and goals reflects no ranking, as they are intrinsically intertwined. The broader work we do as a synod is predicated upon a backbone of congregations being able to support that broader work.)

These priorities and goals must guide our collective efforts through 2035. All our efforts, initiatives, and objectives will align with this thought—Christ through us.

With unwavering reliance on God’s Word, we pray that he would bless all our work, multiply all our efforts, and accomplish his will *through us* for the sake of souls yet to know his reconciling love.

Priority: Culture

CULTIVATING A GOSPEL-DRIVEN CULTURE

Culture is a shared mindset—commonly held values, assumptions, and expectations—that shapes what an organization does. As we mark 175 years of God’s grace, we recognize that the cultural landscape around us has shifted dramatically, with secularism, skepticism, and apathy toward faith challenging the church’s voice. Yet these realities do not diminish the power of the gospel; rather, they compel us to cultivate a gospel-driven culture within our congregations—one where the message of reconciliation, rooted in Christ’s sinless sacrifice, becomes the heartbeat of all we are and do.

A strong, gospel-driven culture determines whether our congregations are outward-reaching or inward-focused, whether members see themselves as Christ’s ambassadors or merely as mission spectators, and whether the good news of salvation permeates our daily lives or fades into a Sunday-only thought. In this priority, we ask the Holy Spirit to work through Word and sacrament, transforming not just our actions but our very identity as a confessional Lutheran church body, so that we might be poised to meet the challenges and opportunities of this generation with boldness and humility.

Imagine a future where congregations assess not just what they are doing in ministry but also ask why, where leaders diligently diagnose unhealthy thought habits within the congregation—pride, complacency, or fear—and prayerfully plan how to nurture new ones rooted in Christ’s love. Imagine a future where our members joyfully lean into their confessional Lutheran identity—not just as a set of doctrines we affirm, but as a Spirit-formed culture that shapes our worship, our witness, and our daily life in Christ. Imagine a future where leaders see their role as not only orchestrating ministry programs but also cultivating a vibrant, gospel-driven culture that empowers those plans to flourish—a culture where every member embraces their role in the ministry of reconciliation and where the gospel’s light shines brightly into a skeptical world.

Here is what we pray Christ might accomplish through us.

GOALS

1. Raise up culture-shaping leaders

A congregation's culture flows first and foremost from the leader—Jesus Christ—who, through his gospel of reconciliation, renews our minds and hearts. Yet in his gracious design, Christ also works through human leaders—called workers and laity alike—to mold the culture of congregations. What leaders emphasize, the priorities they champion, the way they lead—with humility, boldness, compassion, curiosity—profoundly shape the attitudes and habits of the members of their congregations.

Our goal is to help leaders see the weight of their influence—how their words and example can cultivate a gospel-driven culture where the mission is not merely a program but the natural, Spirit-sustained heartbeat of congregational life, flowing from a shared mindset that all believers are Christ's ambassadors.

2. Foster a zealous gospel mindset

The challenges facing our congregations can sometimes lure us into a maintenance-mode mentality, prioritizing institutional preservation—maintaining familiar programs and routines—over the urgent call to bring the message of reconciliation to a world in desperate need of Christ's righteousness. This mindset, while understandable in a time of uncertainty, risks adversely affecting our mission efforts as Christ's ambassadors.

Our goal is to help congregations foster a zealous gospel mindset where the proclamation of Christ drives every decision and action. Rooted in the unchanging truth of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, we will encourage believers to explore fresh ways to reach souls, while holding fast to our doctrine and confidence in Christ's means of grace. This passion transforms us into bold ambassadors, not content with mere survival but eager to carry the ministry of reconciliation to the lost, blending heartfelt zeal with thoughtful adaptability so that our gospel ministry remains faithful and responsive amid the opportunities and trials of this generation.

3. Make outreach a personal effort

In a Western society increasingly drifting from the church, corporate outreach efforts—while still valuable—are becoming increasingly less effective in piercing the cultural haze. The message of reconciliation shines brightest when shared within the context of personal relationships—through believers speaking boldly and lovingly about their Savior in everyday conversations with family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers. Personal evangelism must become the vibrant heartbeat of WELS culture, where every believer embraces their role as a living witness to Christ's love in daily life.

Our goal is to help congregations cultivate this culture by shifting the perception of outreach from a formal church program to an organic, Spirit-led part of daily discipleship. We will provide resources that help believers share their faith confidently and joyfully, trusting the Holy Spirit to multiply these efforts into a harvest of souls.

4. Encourage cross-bearing discipleship

The call to serve as Christ's ambassadors is a high privilege, but it is not an easy path. Jesus himself warned that following him demands self-denial and cross bearing—sacrifices that challenge our natural inclination to seek comfort and security over the costly demands of the gospel. It is tempting to embrace a discipleship that avoids risk, staying within familiar routines rather than risking discomfort for the gospel. Yet the ministry of reconciliation requires believers who are willing to embrace the challenges and hardships inherent in this calling, reflecting the same love that led Christ to the cross.

Our goal is to help congregations shape a culture of cross-bearing discipleship, where members are moved beyond their comfort zones, not out of obligation but out of a Spirit-fueled passion for Christ's mission. Through encouragement and examples rooted in Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, we will help believers to demonstrate courageous love and to bear bold witness to the gospel, even when it invites opposition.

5. Build deep Christian community

The church, united as God's family by Christ's reconciling love, stands in a fragmented society where isolation and division fracture relationships, leaving many yearning for authentic community beyond fleeting connections. In this broken age, the world—especially young people—seeks more than shallow ties. People are looking for a community that helps one another: sharing burdens, constant encouragement. This is exactly what Christ intended his church to be!

Our goal is to help congregations knit members together into something more than friendly acquaintances—the deep Christian community Christ declares us to be: a family of faith. This authentic fellowship not only guards us against the loneliness tearing at our time but also offers a compelling gospel witness, showing a fragmented world the unity and love found in Christ. Trusting the Holy Spirit to work through these bonds, we aim to draw those aching for belonging into the reconciling embrace of the Savior.

Priority: Congregations

STRENGTHENING WELS' BACKBONE

The congregations of WELS form the vital backbone that supports our shared gospel efforts. WELS congregations are beacons of light and truth in their communities, proclaiming the life-giving gospel to a dying world. However, these congregations are not only local gospel outposts but also the foundation of the synod's broader ministry efforts. Through their offerings, they sustain worldwide missions and the planting of new churches. Through their nurture, they identify and encourage the future called workers who will serve the next generation. Through their witness, they embody the love of Christ who reconciled us to God.

Yet we face a sobering reality: the cultural tides of secularism and skepticism threaten to erode this backbone. Strengthening our existing congregations and establishing new ones is not just part of the commission Christ has given; it is strategically essential for the future ministry efforts of WELS.

Imagine a future where our churches pulse with vibrant discipleship, their members deeply engaged in reaching out to their communities with the gospel's hope and working hand-in-hand across the synod to strengthen and expand ministry efforts at home and abroad. Imagine congregations where members see themselves as active participants in Christ's mission—boldly sharing their faith as a natural way of life—rather than passive spectators on the sidelines. Imagine a network of churches, both longstanding and newly planted, radiating the unity and love of Christ, drawing the lost into fellowship and equipping the faithful to stand firm in a fragmented world.

Here is what we pray Christ might accomplish through us.

GOALS

6. Engage the laity in mission

God grants spiritual gifts to all his people to build up his church. However, sometimes congregations function with the mindset that called workers are the ones who do all gospel ministry—evangelism, youth discipleship, etc.—with laity's responsibility being only to support that ministry with prayers and offerings. This mentality can inadvertently obscure or inhibit the joyful exercise of the universal priesthood—leading members to forget the gospel privilege they've been given to serve others in Christ's name.

Our goal is to better engage all members in our congregations, helping them to embrace their God-given role in Christ's mission—viewing their neighbors as their personal mission field and their homes as the heart of youth discipleship. We want all God's people—men and women, young and old—to see that their ideas, insights, and talents are gifts that God has given to his church for use in zealous ministry efforts. We will provide training and resources to help congregations foster an environment where every believer joyfully and confidently serves Christ's mission according to their gifts and callings.

7. Support ministry enhancement efforts

Every WELS congregation faces a distinct blend of opportunities and challenges, shaped by shifting ministry contexts. Some will seek to enhance or revitalize their current mission efforts, particularly if their ministry context has changed. Others will explore regional collaboration, shared ministry, or consolidation to amplify their gospel reach. Still others will prayerfully consider the objectives of their childhood ministries, including Lutheran schools: discipleship, outreach, or both. They will seek to ensure such childhood ministries are sustainable long term.

Our goal is to offer support to WELS congregations in whatever ministry enhancement effort they choose to undertake for Christ's glory. When asked, we will help them assess their strategies, providing the encouragement, advice, and resources that can help them plan and implement efforts that enhance their outreach and discipleship ministries.

8. Expand WELS' reach through strategic church planting

Driven by Christ's reconciling love, we are called to bring the gospel to every corner. Yet America's shifting landscape—marked by growing diversity and population drift—leaves millions beyond the reach of WELS' gospel witness, with only two percent living near our congregations. This gap cries out for action, as souls hunger for the hope of reconciliation in regions where confessional Lutheran ministry is rare. Planting new churches not only meets this need but fortifies our synod's backbone for enduring mission impact.

Our goal is to broaden WELS' reach by planting congregations strategically in underserved areas, pinpointing locations where a faithful Lutheran presence is scarce and equipping them with resources and support grounded in Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. We will nurture these new missions to stand as beacons of Christ's love and truth.

9. Elevate the home as the first mission field

The exodus of young members from WELS underscores a critical need: the home must be reclaimed as the first mission field. In a society—and even within our church—where marriage and childbirth are in decline, we face a diminishing appreciation for family as God's blessed design. Strengthening homes is essential to sustain our congregational backbone and ensure the gospel thrives among future generations.

Our goal is to lift up the home within WELS as the first mission field, equipping parents to embrace their role as spiritual leaders in passing down the faith, with congregations standing to support—not supplant—these family efforts. Future discipleship efforts and resources, especially ones aimed at our younger brothers and sisters, will affirm marriage and childbearing as divine blessings. Trusting the Holy Spirit, we aim to fortify our homes as gospel strongholds.

10. Provide sound Lutheran resources

The most impactful ministry moments tend to happen in face-to-face encounters—personal conversations, shepherding, and witnessing—where Christ's reconciling love touches hearts one soul at a time. At a time when biblical literacy wanes and cultural resistance to Christianity is high, congregations must prioritize these moments. Yet called workers and lay leaders, burdened by administrative tasks and content creation, often lose time for the relational gospel work that bolsters our congregational backbone in a faith-starved world. Seeking help and efficiency, they may find that many of the resources readily available fall short of what a confessional Lutheran congregation would desire.

Our goal is to empower WELS congregations with sound Lutheran resources—for discipleship, worship, outreach, planning, leadership—that reflect confessional Lutheran theology, not generic Christian content, saving time and amplifying impact. God willing, these tools will free congregational leaders for frontline, face-to-face ministry.

Priority: Commission

BRINGING CHRIST TO THE NATIONS

God has entrusted us, as his ambassadors, with the message of reconciliation, commissioning us to proclaim the gospel to every nation, tribe, people, and language—a charge that echoes with urgency in our time. While Christianity wanes in much of the Western world, its light blazes anew in regions where the gospel is still a fresh whisper, revealing the Spirit’s boundless power to gather souls. Yet over 6.5 billion people—more than two-thirds of humanity—dwell in places where Christ’s name is barely known, their hearts unreached by the hope we bear.

In 2025, as WELS reflects on 175 years of grace, we stand at a crossroads: The decline of faith in North America contrasts with unprecedented global opportunities, calling us to extend our confessional Lutheran witness beyond familiar borders. This commission is not a mere task but a sacred privilege, strengthening our synod’s resolve to bring the nations to the foot of the cross.

Imagine a future where, through us, the unchanging truth of God’s Word resounds across continents, uniting over a million souls in faith and sparking a global movement anchored in our confessional Lutheran heritage. Picture not just WELS dispatching missionaries worldwide, but new Lutheran church bodies—birthed by our mission efforts—rising as partners in this divine calling. Envision a day when these vibrant churches, from distant hemispheres, send well-trained missionaries to a spiritually dimming North America, rekindling the message of reconciliation with confessional clarity. Imagine a symphony of nations, bound by the gospel, proclaiming Christ together in joyful unity.

Here is what we pray Christ might accomplish through us.

GOALS

11. Forge a borderless support network

Envision a wave of generosity and support—resources, prayers, people—flowing freely across national borders, a vision born of our call to share Christ’s reconciling love with all. The Great Commission is too big for one church body alone. WELS has long leaned almost exclusively on stateside funding and missionaries—a faithful and blessed beginning to our world mission efforts but now poised to grow. By fostering strong international partnerships, we will expand this holy work, bringing the Spirit’s life-giving power to a dying world.

Our goal is to forge a global support network, transcending national boundaries. We will nurture robust mission collaboration with confessional Lutheran church bodies in full doctrinal fellowship with WELS, equipping pastors and congregations worldwide to thrive as Christ’s ambassadors.

12. Equip a global missionary force

Mature church bodies, entrusted with Christ’s reconciling love, do not merely receive missionaries—they send them as ambassadors to the nations. Historically, WELS has dispatched stateside workers

to plant the gospel, but a world ripe with harvest calls for more. Training indigenous leaders—pastors and evangelists from sister churches globally—unlocks a boundless force to proclaim reconciliation where expatriates alone cannot reach. This shift from dependence to partnership magnifies the Spirit’s work, gathering the elect across borders. It also strengthens our stateside mission, as these global voices will enrich our cross-cultural outreach with fresh zeal and wisdom. Picture a future where thriving Lutheran churches in distant lands send missionaries to a spiritually dim North America, echoing the gospel back to us.

Our goal is to equip a global missionary force through WELS, training indigenous leaders from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and beyond to carry the gospel into new regions. We will guide expatriate missionaries to focus on empowering these leaders with Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, fostering a borderless network that sends workers to their own lands and new frontiers.

13. Establish confessional Lutheran seminaries

A strong church depends on well-trained shepherds who proclaim Christ’s reconciling love. Training called workers has long been a historic strength of WELS, equipping faithful pastors to serve with confessional clarity. As the gospel spreads globally, emerging Lutheran church bodies crave this same depth to sustain their witness. Planting seminaries in strategic regions builds on this foundation, ensuring the Spirit’s reconciling work thrives through our Lutheran heritage for years to come.

Our goal is to establish confessional Lutheran seminaries in key global locations through WELS, training pastors and leaders to shepherd with theological depth and Lutheran fidelity. These centers—grounded in Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions—will empower a worldwide movement to proclaim reconciliation faithfully in their own contexts.

14. Expand multi-language mission efforts

The rapid rise of mission churches worldwide offers rich opportunities to share Christ’s reconciling love, yet poses challenges in grounding believers in Lutheran doctrine amid diverse tongues. Many nations lack Lutheran resources in their native languages, risking theological drift where the gospel’s clarity could fade. Expanding multi-language efforts to deliver sound Lutheran materials strengthens these churches, ensuring the Spirit’s work of reconciliation takes deep root in every land for faithful witness and growth.

Our goal is to expand WELS’ multi-language mission efforts, translating, publishing, and distributing confessional Lutheran materials in print and digital forms to equip churches globally. We will invest in Lutheran media, digital outreach, and theological publications to bolster both evangelism and discipleship efforts. Trusting the Holy Spirit, we aim to empower believers worldwide with tools to grow in faith and proclaim the gospel boldly in their own languages.

15. Pioneer missions in high-risk and unreached areas

WELS has planted mission fields across many lands, yet vast swaths of humanity remain unreached—cut off from Christ’s reconciling love—especially where hostility or strict limits shroud the gospel’s light. These high-risk regions, home to countless souls who may never hear of their Savior, beckon us as his

ambassadors to step boldly into the breach. Tailored strategies for such places can pierce the darkness, extending the Spirit's reconciling work to the farthest edges of the earth.

Our goal is to pioneer WELS missions in high-risk and unreached areas, identifying and crafting strategies—discreet underground networks, business-as-mission efforts, or digital outreach—fitted to these tough contexts. We will train and support workers to bring the gospel where it's least known.

PRIORITY: CALLING

PRODUCING WORKERS FOR A GROWING HARVEST

Jesus declared the fields ripe for harvest yet lamented the scarcity of workers—a truth that echoes today as WELS, entrusted with the message of reconciliation, expands its gospel reach. Planting new churches, opening mission fields, and growing Lutheran schools amplify the call for pastors, teachers, and staff ministers to serve as Christ's ambassadors. Yet decades of declining birth rates and membership contraction press us to face a sobering reality: our capacity to produce called workers strains under these demands.

At WELS' 175th anniversary, we stand at a pivotal moment. Faithful stewardship of this mission requires us to act with wisdom and urgency. We must intensify efforts to recruit and train workers while aligning plans for ministry growth with projections of a sustainable workforce. This dual task is not merely practical but a sacred charge to equip God's people to proclaim his love to a world in need, now and for generations ahead.

Imagine a future where men and women eagerly heed the call to ministry, their hearts stirred to carry Christ's gospel to the nations and their communities. Picture diverse pathways into service—flexible, faithful training that welcomes more gifts into the harvest—where pastors, teachers, and staff ministers eagerly answer the calling to public ministry. Envision a WELS where planned expansions thrive, unhindered by persistent vacancies, as a steady stream of called workers, grounded in confessional Lutheran truth, sustains vibrant churches, schools, and missions with joy and purpose.

Here is what we pray Christ will accomplish through us.

GOALS

16. Expand pathways into gospel ministry

The Lord of the Church, having entrusted us with the ministry of reconciliation, provides workers in diverse ways to gather his harvest. Ministerial education has been a tremendous strength of WELS. By God's grace, we have cultivated servants deeply versed in the theology and artistry of Lutheran ministry. Yet a rapidly shrinking candidate pool urges us to broaden access, ensuring every willing heart is equipped to meet the new challenges of 21st-century ministry. Thus, in recent years, WELS has provided new ways to enter ministry (e.g., enhanced competency-based ministry certification for teachers).

Our goal is to carefully expand pathways into gospel ministry, with all efforts overseen by Martin Luther College and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. We will better leverage technology to accommodate remote learning, while simultaneously stressing the blessing of the bonds developed with future ministry colleagues through in-person learning. We pray these pathways will reach a broader and more diverse pool of candidates, ensuring that every willing and qualified individual is equipped to serve.

17. Innovate recruitment efforts for future called workers

The Lord entrusts the church with his ministry of reconciliation, then calls workers to lead in the mission. The need for more called workers is ever urgent as new fields open. To sustain—let alone expand—our gospel reach, we must pursue bold, creative recruitment, stirring hearts both young and seasoned to answer Christ’s calling, publicly proclaiming Christ’s reconciliation in a world aching for hope.

Our goal is to innovate recruitment within WELS, seeking fresh ways to spark zeal in youth and second-career candidates for gospel ministry. Congregations will lead, cultivating spaces where all ages are urged to serve, armed with practical tools and guidance to identify and encourage future workers. We will tirelessly forge a steady stream of servants, trusting the Holy Spirit to multiply our efforts for an abundant harvest.

18. Ensure the long-term stability of ministerial education

For generations, WELS has been richly blessed by a robust ministerial education system, equipping faithful workers to proclaim the gospel with steadfast clarity. The sacred task of training called workers to share Christ’s reconciling love rests on our ministerial education schools. These schools must remain steadfast, adaptable, and financially sound to equip servants amid shrinking numbers and shifting needs. Without a stable foundation, we risk faltering in our mission to raise up workers who proclaim reconciliation for generations in a world yearning for hope.

Our goal is to ensure the long-term stability of WELS’ ministerial education system, sustaining our schools to train new workers for generations to come. We will pursue a strategy, including a comprehensive facilities plan, that keeps these schools financially secure and right-sized for the workers we can realistically expect to prepare, ensuring a steady supply of servants to share Christ’s love.

19. Establish a sustainable strategy for called worker development

Expanding gospel ministry flows from our longing to share Christ’s reconciling love, yet uncoordinated growth strains us when called workers fall far short of mounting needs. WELS must weigh the desire to expand ministry efforts against our capacity to raise up called workers, a stewardship vital for a sustainable future. Without a steady plan, we risk leaving missions understaffed or overburdening our servants. Since Christ works through us, both those risks potentially dim the gospel’s reach.

Our goal is to help WELS leaders—in the synod, congregations, and schools—consider their options

for sustainable staffing models. We will share strategies—pacing growth, pooling resources—to help align called worker demand with supply. Trusting the Holy Spirit to bless these efforts, we will ensure that the growing number of ministry opportunities is matched by a workforce that is prepared, supported, and able to serve effectively for years to come.

20. Support the well-being of called workers

The Lord sends workers to a harvest that demands steadfast endurance. WELS called workers pour out their lives to proclaim this gospel, yet ministry's potentially heavy yoke—intensified by rising demands and fewer hands—can sow weariness and lead to loss. With workers scarce, retaining these faithful servants is as crucial as recruiting them, their strength a lifeline for the mission. Upholding their well-being keeps Christ's light ablaze in a world shrouded by sin's darkness.

Our goal is to bolster the well-being of WELS called workers, equipping them with resources for spiritual renewal, emotional fortitude, and physical vigor. We will empower congregations with practical tools—assessment and care strategies—to gauge and meet workers' needs, fostering resilience and joy in service.

OUR PROCESS

To bring the “Christ through us” long-range strategic plan to life, we entrust its execution to key groups within WELS, uniting their efforts to proclaim the message of reconciliation through 2035.

- The synod president, in counsel with the President's Advisory Council (PAC), will craft a biennial ministry plan for the Synodical Council and the Synod in Convention, weaving continuity in our gospel mission with bold responses to emerging opportunities and challenges.
- WELS ministry groups will align all objectives and efforts with the goals of this plan, detailing their work annually in the *Book of Reports and Memorials* and *Report to the Twelve Districts*, ensuring our work focuses on our priorities.
- The Conference of Presidents (COP) will coordinate the work of circuit pastors, WELS Communication Services, and the Ministry of Christian Giving (MCG) to encourage both Congregation Mission Offerings and special gifts from individuals and groups for the general work of WELS, as well as for special efforts that fall under the “Christ through us” goals.
- The Synodical Council (SC) will steward Congregation Mission Offerings, prior gifts in the Financial Stabilization Fund, and new contributions, allocating them wisely in each biennial plan while monitoring progress to keep our mission thriving.

These groups will unite in purpose, steadfast in God's Word, assessing progress regularly to refine our course and faithfully serve Christ's harvest with unwavering resolve.

OUR PRAYER

Under the banner “Christ through us,” we rejoice in all that Christ has wrought across seven generations, taking our synod from just three humble congregations in the greater Milwaukee area to what is now a worldwide church body, boldly proclaiming Christ’s reconciling love in every hemisphere. We thank our gracious God that he, in his boundless mercy, chose us—flawed, frail, and sinful though we are—to bear this gospel to countless souls. Looking back, we lift our praise for every blessing, every soul drawn to faith through his mighty Spirit. We thank Christ for choosing to do this through us.

The “Christ through us” long-range strategic plan now turns our gaze forward, to a horizon brimming with both challenge and promise. This vision summons every heart in WELS to embrace the role Christ gives to each, understanding we all have a role to play in this collective effort. We commit our plans to the Lord, trusting in the power of his Word. Our prayer is that, with the faith and strength that Christ himself provides, as each of us labors with the message of reconciliation, then by 2035:

- We will not merely plant a few new home mission congregations but see every WELS church operating with the evangelistic zeal of a mission church.
- We will not limit thoughts of new mission fields to distant continents but see them in every neighbor across the street, every soul near our doors yearning for hope.
- We will not settle for a few hundred new called workers but awaken hundreds of thousands of Lutherans to live as the ambassadors Christ has made us to be.

The work of the church is *Christ’s* alone, yet he deigns to work *through us*. As WELS steps into its eighth generation, may his Spirit, through the Word, empower us for his purpose, multiply our humble efforts, and gather a harvest of souls into his eternal embrace.



WELS Long-Range Planning Task Force

Rev. Mark Gabb, *administrator of WELS Board for Home Missions*

Rev. Jonathan Hein, *coordinator of WELS Congregational Services*

Rev. James Huebner, *WELS first vice president*

Mr. Kurt Nitz, *member of WELS Commission on Congregational Counseling*

Mr. Dan Nommensen, *director of WELS Communication Services*

Rev. Paul Prange, *administrator of WELS Board for Ministerial Education*

Rev. Larry M. Schlomer, *administrator of WELS Board for World Missions*

Mr. Martin Spriggs, *WELS chief technology officer*

“Christ through us”: Addendum A

Strategic plan components

PRIORITIES AND GOALS

The “Christ through us” strategic plan contains four priorities—broad ministry directions we have identified as crucial in the coming years. Priorities answer the question, “What must we focus on right now?” These are few in number and long-term in focus, providing clarity and alignment across the synod.

Each priority has corresponding goals—key long-term outcomes we pray the Lord of the Church allows us to achieve. Goals answer the question, “What are we aiming to accomplish?” Goals bridge the high-level direction (priorities) and the day-to-day action (objectives).

OBJECTIVES

Objectives are the specific actions, efforts, or programs we carry out to accomplish each goal. Objectives answer the question, “How are we going to get there?” Priorities and goals are broad and long term. Objectives are SMART:

Specific: answering “who, what, when”

Measurable: there are criteria for tracking progress

Achievable: realistic and attainable, considering available resources and constraints

Relevant: clearly supports one of the “Christ through us” goals

Time-bound: a deadline/timeframe is established

Areas of ministry will pull their biannual objectives into a framework that includes:

Objective: a concise description of the action, effort, or program

Goal: the goal(s) of the “Christ through us” strategic plan that objective supports

Who: the entity(s) that is responsible for the objective

When: the due date for the objective (some are ongoing)

Funding: A) operational funds, B) divisional funds, C) additional funding needed

KPIs/Conditions: how progress of the objective is measured or assessed

MANAGEMENT

The priorities and goals remain fixed, providing focus as we begin the eighth generation of WELS ministry and attempt to navigate the challenges before us. The objectives are expanded over time, as opportunities or challenges present themselves, yet always align with the goals of “Christ through us.”

An ongoing list of objectives for all areas of ministry, including the components of that framework, will be reported in future issues of *Report to the Twelve Districts* and *Book of Reports and Memorials*. That list will also allow the Synodical Council to look at funded and unfunded efforts in its efforts to steward Congregation Mission Offerings and other funding sources.

In all these efforts, we place our confidence not in our planning, but in Christ, who works through us.

“Christ through us”: Addendum B

The importance of culture

Every organization has a culture—commonly held values, assumptions, and expectations—that shapes what that organization does. Congregations are no different. You can picture congregational health as a pyramid. The foundation is Word and sacrament. St. Paul says, “You are . . . fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” (Ephesians 2:19,20). Without that foundation, the church does not exist.

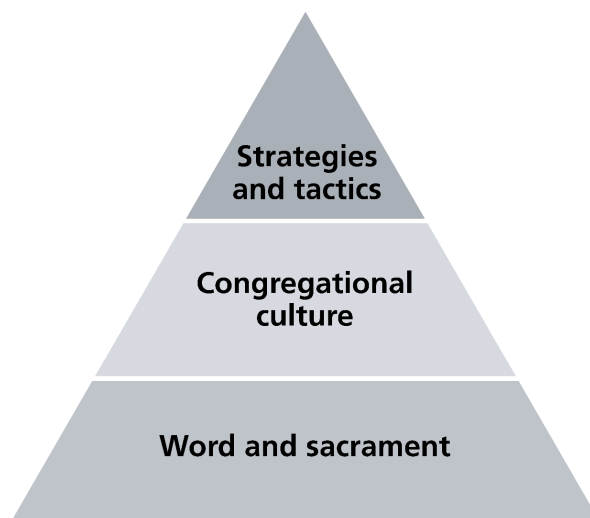
The top of the pyramid is our strategies and tactics—the ways we use Word and sacrament in our mission to disciple believers and evangelize the lost.

In between is congregational culture—the thought habits of the members. If a congregation is going to choose sound strategies and execute them well, members must have the right thoughts, attitudes, and expectations comprising their culture. Healthy culture supports sound ministry efforts.

Every WELS congregation has aspects of healthy culture. For example, by God’s grace, WELS congregations have maintained a rock-solid trust in the efficacy of God’s Word. *Sola Scriptura*. We know that God chooses to create and sustain faith through Scripture alone. Thus, all our ministry strategies have the ultimate aim of leading people into the gospel. However, congregations often have unhealthy elements as part of their congregational culture. This inevitably acts to the detriment of those congregations’ gospel ministry. Shaping a healthy, gospel-driven culture is a major focus of the “Christ through us” plan.

The list below contains some examples of unhealthy cultural aspects that WELS congregations have observed when doing honest self-assessment. For each example there is an explanation of how we pray that Christ, through us, might shift culture: FROM the unhealthy mindset TO a mindset that is more supportive of our gospel efforts.

This list is shared to illustrate the importance of congregational culture. It may also serve as a diagnostic tool for individuals congregations. With more than a thousand congregations in WELS, there is a broad range in congregational culture. Just as each congregation is unique, the path taken from using this diagnostic will be unique. (Note: The *Shadow of the Leader* program, developed to support “Christ through us—Goal 1: Raise up culture-shaping leaders,” helps congregational leaders with this effort.)



FROM Institutional preservation as the *de facto* focus

TO Zealous gospel proclamation as the explicit, overriding focus

Some WELS congregations operate with a maintenance-mode mentality. Zealous gospel proclamation means shifting from “How do we sustain our congregation?” to “How do we bring Christ to more souls with urgency and joy?”

FROM Outreach occurs primarily through congregational programs and committees

TO Outreach occurs primarily through members interacting with the unchurched

WELS congregations often rely on structured outreach programs, expecting those to draw people in. Yet many of the unchurched in our communities have a negative view of organized religion. However, they are still willing to discuss spiritual matters with their Christian neighbor. This culture shift means members joyfully embrace their individual role as Christ’s ambassador, sharing the message of reconciliation with which we have been entrusted.

FROM Ministry is accomplished through our called workers, with support of the members

TO Ministry is accomplished by our members as equipped by our called workers

Sometimes congregations default to a “pastor does the ministry” model. The expectation is for members to support and cheer on the church’s efforts. For example, in many congregations, schools disciple kids with minimal parental input and corporate outreach is stressed over personal evangelism. This shift sees pastors not as the doers of all gospel ministry but as ones who equip members as they embrace their callings as Christ’s ambassador: growing in faith and sharing it, spiritually leading their family, etc.

FROM Comfortable Christians

TO Cross-bearing Christians

Sometimes in our Christian lives we prefer to keep our faith low profile and safe, staying within familiar routines rather than risking discomfort for the gospel. The shift is to a culture of cross-bearing Christians, where service in Christ’s kingdom pushes us beyond our comfort zones—embracing the challenges and sacrifices of sharing the message of reconciliation.

FROM *Status quo* mindset; reluctance to depart from tactics

TO Thoughtfully exploring new ideas with curiosity

Ministry tactics must be examined to see if they are serving the gospel well. Some congregations resist change even when better ministry models could strengthen the church and reach more people. The shift would mean maintaining fidelity to Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions while embracing curiosity about methodology.

FROM Resigned to decline

TO Committed to renewed efforts

Membership drops and aging demographics can foster a fatalistic slump: “There’s nothing we can do.” The shift is to a culture of hope—that through his means of grace the Lord of the Church can spark ministry revitalization. We give Christ our most zealous mission efforts while always leaving the results of those efforts completely in his loving hands.

FROM Not fully utilizing women’s insights or gifts

TO Women using their gifts in every biblically appropriate way

In some WELS congregations, at times, the ideas and insights of women are unheard and their gifts and skills not fully tapped. This can lead to sisters in Christ feeling discouraged, and it harms the congregation’s efforts. The shift is to a culture where women are appropriately involved in congregational ministry, not altering or bypassing biblical principles but upholding them in a way that reflects the complementary design God established at creation.

Culture is a major focus of the “Christ through us” long-range strategic plan, serving as one of the priorities. You will note culture shifts embedded throughout the goals of that plan.