

## **WELS NEWS** **October, 2016**

### **Changes for Reformation 500 celebration in Milwaukee**

We can count many blessings within our Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod: faithful ministers of the gospel, teachers dedicated to teaching children about Jesus, thousands of faithful lay members, musicians who use their gifts to glorify God in worship—just to name a few. As Lutherans, perhaps one of the things we're most thankful for is what God has given us through Martin Luther, who nearly 500 years ago boldly yet humbly worked to bring the church back to the true teachings of Scripture.

It was only natural, then, that we would want to celebrate the 2017 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation as a synod on a national scale. Planning for such an event has been underway for several months. The initial plan was to have a pastors' symposium involving all WELS pastors, a national teachers' conference attended by all WELS teachers, and a closing worship service for called workers and WELS members in the BMO Harris Center in downtown Milwaukee. You may have read about it in the 2016 Report to the Twelve Districts, in the Together newsletter, or on the synod website. You will see a mention of it in the December WELS Connection, which has already been recorded.

As details of what would be involved in such a celebration started to unfold—where we would hold it; how many people would attend; and the costs involved for the synod, for congregations, and for called workers—we could reach only one conclusion. We concluded that it not be wise stewardship of God's gifts to hold a national Reformation 500 event as first planned. At a price tag of approximately \$400,000 or more—far higher than original estimates—the President's office, with the consensus of the planning committee, has decided to cancel this event. In addition to the costs involved, it became clear that this celebration had the potential to detract from other events planned by districts, congregations, and Lutheran high schools.

As Luther himself would ask, "What does this mean?" It means that the fall 2017 pastors' and teachers' conferences, as well as the annual symposium hosted by Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, will be held as regularly scheduled in their normal locations throughout the synod. Details about those individual conferences will be coming from the respective planning committees. It means that we can encourage worship leaders and musicians around the synod to attend one of

three National Worship Conferences next summer without taking focus away from those popular events. It means that the talented area Lutheran high school choirs won't be asked to leave school extra days to attend an event in Milwaukee as well as the national choral festival two weeks later in Onalaska, Wis. It means that we will encourage WELS members to attend regional or area reformation worship services near them. And, in a time of budget planning that involves no increases in synodical spending, we can focus our financial resources on ministry work—spreading the gospel, helping congregations, and supporting our ministerial education schools.

Martin Luther's reformation is certainly worthy of celebration, and we are happy that many events are being planned at the synod, district, and congregation level around the country. In addition, the Reformation 500 committee is planning to mark this important event with various publications, Bible studies, and a special movie documentary about Luther and his work. Information about these projects and events can be found at [wels.net/reformation500](http://wels.net/reformation500). If your district, circuit, or congregation is planning something special, let us know and we will add it to the listings on the website.

Serving in Christ,

President Mark Schroeder

### **Redefining home**

“How can I help you?”

“Thanks for visiting; feel free to show yourself out.”

To Americans, the above phrases are part of polite, everyday dialogue. To WELS missionaries, who have spent years, sometimes decades, in their mission field, these phrases can be not only foreign, but rude.

Rude? In Zambia, according to retired missionary Rev. Stephen Lawrenz and his wife, Lori, who spent nearly 30 years in Africa, “How can I help you?” implies you're being inconvenienced and is a major insult.

“You can show yourself out.” For former missionary Rev. Brad Wordell and his wife, Andrea, who spent 17 years in Japan with five children, this social practice is much too casual. After a year

back in the U.S., they still prefer to bow to their guests when they leave, per Japanese customs.

WELS missionaries are sent around the world and asked to acclimate and integrate themselves into a foreign culture. They learn the language, customs, culture, social practices—they truly become part of the country as they work to share the gospel.

In August, a group of former WELS missionaries, some retired and some returning to the U.S. for new calls, met at the WELS Center for Mission and Ministry, Waukesha, Wis., for a two-day “repatriation retreat.”

Administrator for World Missions Rev. Larry Schlomer, who has been through this process more than once in different phases of his life, says, “The retreat is a recognition that people, once they live overseas for an extended period of time, really change in their worldview. When they come back to the United States, they’re actually not coming back to their home country, because they know their home country from 7, 10, 20 years ago. Things will have changed drastically in that time. What they expect is what they left however long ago.”

Seemingly routine things like going to a grocery store and trying to decipher what products are a good value, ordering at a fast food restaurant, and navigating retirement benefits can be frustrating for returning missionary families. On top of day-to-day tasks that are now foreign, they have left people, friends, a home, and a ministry that they loved.

“You get to where you don’t know how to do things in the States anymore, and you feel like an outsider. Nobody is really like you, and people don’t understand you,” says Andrea Wordell.

For Rev. Adam Gawel and his wife, Sherri, the roles are reversing. Adam met Sherri while serving in East Asia, and after more than seven years of living and starting a family in East Asia, the Gawels and their three children moved to Chicago after Adam accepted a new call. This time, it is Sherri moving to a foreign country.

Adam has noticed how the ministry work is different. “Being a foreigner in East Asia, it was very easy to talk to people. They’re very willing to engage with you in conversation, even religious conversation. But here in the U.S., people are a little more

hesitant to talk about religion and maybe more suspicious if you approach them.”

The Wordells have also noticed there is fervor in non-Christian countries to spread the gospel that isn't as strong in the U.S. where Christianity is still the dominant religion.

When the Lawrenzes left for Africa 30 years ago with two small children and one on the way, they treated the experience like an adventure. Stephen says, “Now I look at America like a foreign country, and I have to figure it out too.” They say they know to put their trust in God as they face each new chapter.

Stephen returns with a worldview only someone who has shared his family's experiences can have. He says, “People throughout the world do not all think the same way. They do not always have the same way of looking at things. And I'm not talking about the differences between sin and righteousness. I'm talking just different ways that they handle life and how they observe things.” He says that while it's only natural for people, from any country, to view the world through their own cultural experiences, there isn't always a right or wrong way to view or handle daily life.

Schlomer says, “The retreat is to get several people who have gone through this experience together so they learn from each other and realize there are some common themes they will be facing.”

Two speakers—one a former child of a missionary (also known as a “third culture kid”) who has training in counseling and the other a counselor from Christian Family Solutions—came to offer counseling, insight, and expertise to the former missionaries and their wives.

Brad Wordell says, “We're very thankful for what happened here over the last couple of days. They did a nice job of setting up the retreat.”