



# First Things ~April/May 2024

## Commitment

There is a true story about a little pioneer girl who settled in the Republic of Texas. Cynthia Parker and her family lived inside the safety of a fort that enjoyed relative peace with the native tribes around it. But one day the fort was attacked, and Cynthia's father was killed. Cynthia was kidnapped by the Comanche tribe. This tribe lived in an area of Texas that was so remote it prohibited her rescue. Eventually, she was assimilated into the tribe. Everyone at the fort gave up on her. Everyone except for Cynthia's uncle. Cynthia's uncle assumed the role of her father, his own late brother, and insisted the family never stop looking for her. The dream of finding her became a reality almost twenty-five years later. By this time, she married a Comanche warrior and became a faithful wife and mother in the tribe. Cynthia was returned to her Texas family where she only tried to escape and make her way back to her familiar home with the Comanche. Her plan failed and she died only a few years later, separated from her Comanche family with a broken heart. What unpredictable commitment in the face of tragic events! An uncle committed to finding his long-lost relative. A young woman committed to her adopted family.

There is one who is even more committed to you. He is one who formed you and calls you, "MINE." He was there as your heart started to beat and as your tiny fingers opened and closed. Even a mother is blind to the formation of her baby in her own womb. Yet, your God saw you. By grace in his Word, he is with you now, moving jointly alongside any trial with his comfort and peace. Only God's ear can hear your sighs during a hard day or your shudders through pain. How often do you futilely relate your stress to others? Dear child, your God already knows. He is there, bearing you up, during every ache of your heart. Because his Son, Jesus, committed himself to you with every step toward Calvary, he calls you, "MINE". Because he paid for your sin with each nail to the cross there is no place too far, not even death, that can sever his devotion to you. Right now, he is preparing a place for you in heaven to celebrate his commitment by grace to you. No spouse, no friend, no therapist could forge a bond that close to you! Your God calls you, "MINE!" He is committed to you now and forever!

## Looking Ahead Personally

Slowly, slowly things are coming together for Sue and me. We closed on a house in Holmen on April 24. I have also received and accepted a part-time retirement call to St. John's in Barre Mills.

Sue and I will be moving things over to the Holmen house little by little until the end of June. And I'll take up my new duties at Barre Mills after I finish here at the end of June.

Living in La Crescent and serving here at First has been a great blessing for both Sue and me. We're most grateful for all the support and care we have experienced. We hope our paths will cross now and then in the future.

## Looking Ahead Congregationally

On Tuesday, April 23, the congregation called **Pastor John Stelter** to be our new pastor. He currently serves St. John Lutheran Church in Princeton, Wisconsin. He is 40 years old. His wife **Barbara** serves at the Little Lambs Learning Center in Montello, Wisconsin. Together they have five children; ages 13, 12, 9, 6, and 4. He serves as the circuit pastor for the Big Green Lake Circuit of the Northern Wisconsin District. The call list described him: *In evangelism John shows great initiative and comes across as a kind of "every man" who relates well to many different kinds of people. As a leader he is organized and diligent, capable of working a ministry plan. He has a heart for equipping Christians to speak about Jesus and have an answer for common objections to Biblical teaching.* If he accepts our call – maybe a month from now – he and his family could possibly be here near the end of June.



If he declines our call, Minnesota District President Dennis Klatt is looking for a retired pastor who would be willing to serve First (and possibly St. John's in Nodine) for three or four months.



Pastor Rieke will be attending the annual meeting of the One Africa Team in Zambia, leaving on May 2 and returning on Sunday, May 12. **Pastor John Wolff** will be serving us on Sunday, May 5 and Sunday, May 12. If you are in need of a pastor during this time, please contact **Pastor John Unnasch** at 507-450-2882.

Pastor and Sue will be at the LWMS Convention on June 30 (Pastor Lindholm will be at First), so his last Sunday in the pulpit will be Sunday, June 23.

## Looking at the Big Picture

We here at First are concerned about a potential vacancy, and rightfully so. But it's important to look at the bigger picture in the WELS, in the Minnesota District, and in the area:

### WELS

- 157 vacant congregations are calling
- 27 seminary graduates are available

### Minnesota

- 26 vacant congregations are calling, 6 for over a year and 5 others for more than two years

## Current or Soon-to-be Area Vacancies

1. St. John's, Nodine
2. St. Luke's, Pickwick
3. First, La Crosse
4. Christ, West Salem
5. St. Peter of Chaseburg and Hamburg
6. Christ Our Rock, Rochester
7. Resurrection & Life, Rochester
8. Grace, Oronoco

Many are asking, *why are there so many vacancies?*

It's tempting to answer: *Because we don't have enough pastors*, but the answer is more complicated than that. Consider the facts:

	1990	2022
<b>WELS Pastors</b>	1,361	1,359
<b>WELS Congregations</b>	1,221	1,243
<b>WELS Members</b>	421,396	330,879

So, if there are only two fewer pastors than thirty years ago and only twenty-two more congregations, why are there 157 vacancies WELS-wide?

The answer to that question is *at least* three-fold:

1. Larger congregations now often have two, three, or more pastors, and:
  - a. 140 WELS congregations have 500-1,000 members
  - b. 50 WELS congregations have 1,000-1,500 members
  - c. 20 WELS congregations have 1,500+ members
2. There are now 27 area Lutheran high schools (there were 11 fifty years ago), many with two or more pastors as instructors.
3. There is a growing number of *para-synodical* organizations which call WELS pastors; organizations like Time of Grace, Thoughts of Faith, Truth in Love Ministries and the like.

The vacancy situation is especially difficult for *tiny* congregations, and that's a lot of congregations:

460 (that's 40%) of WELS congregations have fewer than 50 in worship each week.

230 of those are within a 10-minute drive of another WELS congregation.

That's the situation right now. It's a matter for reflection, discussion, planning, and most especially PRAYER. But don't forget our Lord's words, ***I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future*** (Jeremiah 29:11).

## Board for Lay Ministry

The quarterly congregational meeting took place after worship on Sunday, April 21. At that meeting:

- A. Pastor Rieke announced the following membership movements:



- 1) **Megan & Cody Beisker** have requested a transfer FROM First Lutheran TO St. Matthew's in Stoddard
- 2) **Greg & Amy Van Lin** have requested a transfer FROM First Lutheran TO St. Paul's in Onalaska
- 3) **Chelsea Prigge** has requested a transfer TO First Lutheran FROM St. John's in Lewiston – see picture of Chelsea and her children on the left

B. Tim Welke (Property and Grounds Elder) reported that

- a water leak has been repaired at the parsonage,
- the church entry has been painted,
- the ELC microwave has been replaced, and
- a **worklist** will be created and available at the church during the month of May for little projects that can be completed by members as they have time.

At the quarterly meeting, eleven were released from membership after not having attended worship since January 1, 2020, and after being unresponsive to repeated contact attempts.

The First Steps Early Learning Center remains full to capacity. The most serious ongoing issue is finding qualified people to work.

## LWMS – Lutheran Women's Missionary Society

The 2024 LWMS Winona Circuit Spring Rally took place at Good Shepherd in Holmen on April 13. With the theme, "The Truth will Set You Free", the event was attended by 112 ladies (including three from First Lutheran). A variety of mission displays and speakers gave current information on WELS Missions in addition to the main presenters on Institutional Ministries/Prison Chaplaincy and our local La Crosse jail ministry. Please [CLICK HERE](#) to view the presentations.

The Good Shepherd ladies were the hosts and provided all with breakfast snacks before and a delicious lunch following the presentation. New mission projects selected for this next year include 'Tools for Outreach' (Home Mission), and 'Africa' (World Mission). The next rally will be in October at Christ Lutheran, Cochrane, WI.

God Bless,

Pastor Mark

2024 Finances	
Through March	
Church Expenses	\$60,807
Church Offerings/Income	\$64,786
CURRENT Surplus	\$3,979
The current surplus is due in large measure to <b>Debt Reductions offerings</b> (\$6,760 to date) – thank the Lord and thank you for those – and the larger number of worship services during Lent and Holy Week.	
ELC Expenses	\$107,623
ELC Income	\$128,696
Mortgage Balance	\$280,329