

BY THE WORD

SPRING 2026



PHOTO CONTEST

LCMC congregations share how they made a difference in 2025

EQUIPPING LEADERS

Practical tips to help train and care for leaders in your congregation

THE FARMERS OF LCMC

A look at how small churches today can shape promising leaders for the future

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EDITOR'S LETTER

Welcome to the Spring 2026 issue of *By the Word!*

I've always thought of spring as a strange time of year. According to Instagram, it's a time to dress up in cute pastel outfits and twirl around in fields of flowers and Swiss chard. In reality, it is usually still gloomy, cold, and dead-looking outside where I live, my favorite trails are all too muddy to hike on, and it seems like I always end up getting sick. Eventually, the excitement of a new year seems to have faded away, and I'm left wondering how many of the goals and projects and ideas that I wrote in my planner in January are going to get derailed by life in the weeks to come.

But then, the snowdrops in my flower bed suddenly pop up through the mud and slush and dead leaves. One by one, all the seeds and plants that I ordered months ago—when I was feeling motivated—start to arrive on my doorstep, and it hits me that now I have to actually put in the effort of growing and caring for them. The trails and sidewalks become clear enough to run and

hike on again, and the more I go out, the stronger and more capable I start to feel. Easter comes, and with it, time spent with family and the promise of hope.

The truth is, spring often feels like a time of uncertainty, and times of uncertainty *are* weird. Feeling “stuck” is uncomfortable and frustrating. Sometimes we catch ourselves mindlessly doom scrolling on our phones, getting a little too wrapped up in TV, video games, or sports, or maintaining a constant state of busyness in the hopes that it will help numb our feelings long enough to get us through to better times. For some, dealing with clinical issues like anxiety or depression only adds to the challenge. So, how do we get through it?

When our team sat down to plan out this issue of *By the Word!*, we knew that first and foremost, we wanted to create something that would carry the theme of our 2025 Annual Gathering & Convention, “Our Help and Hope”, into the new year. In light of the negative news headlines and cost of living increases, the constant buffet of rage bait we

consume on social media, and the stress of everyday life, it's important to not lose sight of our reason for hope.

Second, we wanted to offer something more than a pep talk. We wanted to share practical resources for congregations who may be struggling with issues like navigating conflict or finding a pastor. If you are currently in the process of dealing with one of these issues, please know that behind the scenes in our association, people are continuing to work on ways to help.

Finally, we wanted to share the life and work of the local church through photos and storytelling. Connecting with other congregations in LCMC reminds us that we're not alone. We all have something to offer, and an important role to play, regardless of the size and style of our church.

As you explore this issue, my hope is that it brings at least a little bit of brightness to your day.

Kristy Thomas

NEW & NOTEWORTHY



LCMC Retirement Plan Program Sees New Recordkeeper, Contribution Limits for 2026

The representatives for LCMC's 403(b) program have announced a recordkeeping transition from OneAmerica to Voya coming in mid-April, as well as new contribution limits for 2026.

Be on the lookout for correspondence from Voya if you have not received it already, and be sure to review the documents. Beginning April 13, you must register your retirement account on the Voya website to be able to access it. To learn more about Voya and the transition, go to voya.com/oneamerica-individuals.

The transition will occur over a weekend, so your account assets will not be out of the market during the transfer, and will remain invested in your investment allocation.

As you plan your savings for the year ahead, the 2026 contribution limits set forth by the IRS are as follows:

- ▶ Employee contributions: \$24,500
- ▶ Age 50 to 59 and 64+, catch-up contribution: \$8,000
- ▶ Age 60 through 63 catch up contribution: \$11,250
- ▶ Employee plus employer contributions cannot exceed \$72,000

To learn more about LCMC's 403(b) retirement and benefits plans, or to get in touch with one of our plan representatives, visit our website at www.lcmc.net/retirement-benefits.

New Videos, Podcast Episodes Available for Streaming

As the days grow longer and the temperatures gradually begin to warm up, we have lots of new content available to binge while you tackle those spring cleaning and yard-work projects, head out for a workout, or simply spend a cozy afternoon indoors with a cup of your favorite coffee or tea.

Videos from our 25th Annual Gathering & Convention are now available for streaming. Viewers can access keynote talks, Bible studies, select breakout sessions, and more, on demand from our website and in the LCMC app.

Last year, LCMC also launched its first official podcast. The TableCast, hosted by LCMC pastors Christian Huntley and Scott Hawkins, explores the life and theology of the association through interviews with LCMC church leaders. Episodes are available through Apple, Spotify, the LCMC website, and in the LCMC app.

Links to our videos and podcasts can also be shared with others by clicking on the share icon from our website or mobile app.

LCMC Launches New Calendar Features

Several new features are now available on the LCMC website to help improve user experience while viewing and submitting events for our online calendar.

New features include map integration, support for adding zoom links and livestream links to virtual events, and improved clarity on logistical details, such as how to register and find lodging for in-person events, who events are being hosted by, and which time zone they occur in.

To view upcoming events, or to contribute an event to the LCMC calendar, visit our website at www.lcmc.net, then go to Events > Calendars.

2026 Prayer Calendars Available to Download

Newsletter subscribers, keep your eyes out for a free downloadable prayer calendar to share with your congregation in each of our monthly emails.

Our prayer calendars offer petitions for each day of the calendar year, offering congregations a way to stay connected, and for each of us to make room in our regular habits for prayer. More information, including how to submit a prayer request, can be found on our website.

If you're not already on our email list, you can sign up by scanning this QR code with your smartphone.



SCAN ME

Upcoming Events:

ONLINE MEETINGS:

Church Planting Conversation

First Thursdays • 10:00 A.M. CT • Online

Contact: erica@thetableministry.org

The Upper Room - Virtual Prayer Meeting

Second Tuesdays • 9:00 A.M. CT • Online

Contact: prayers@augustanadistrict.org

Global Mission Fellowship Monthly Check-in

Second Tuesdays • 12:00 P.M. ET • Online

Contact: mike@sonetwork.org

Support Group for Church Staff

Second Tuesdays • 12:00 P.M. CT • Online

Contact: office@augustanadistrict.org

Intentional Interim Zoom

Third Tuesdays • 2:00 P.M. CT • Online

Contact: marcus@revdrorange.com

Districts & Fellowship Leaders Zoom

Fourth Tuesdays • 3:00 P.M. CT • Online

Contact: julie@lcmc.net

RETREATS:

First Call Retreat

April 23-24 • Mount Carmel Ministries • Alexandria, MN

Contact: office@augustanadistrict.org

LeaderCare Retreat

May 3-6 • Riverside Bible Camp • Story City, IA

Contact: grillmaster89@gmail.com

Pre-Retirement Retreat

August 18-21 • Okoboji Lutheran Bible Camp

Contact: sue.gunderson61@gmail.com or pastorjpn@gmail.com

Retired Pastors & Spouses Retreat

August 24-27 • Okoboji Lutheran Bible Camp

Contact: sue.gunderson61@gmail.com or pastorjpn@gmail.com

SPRING GATHERINGS:

Northwest District Annual Gathering

April 23-26 • Camp Lutherhaven • Coeur d'Alene, ID

Contact: skutsheke@gmail.com

Augustana District Convention

April 25 • Mount Carmel Ministries • Alexandria, MN

Contact: office@augustanadistrict.org

*** For a complete list of upcoming events, please check out the Calendar Page on our website. ***



Was God Still Good on Saturday?

BY STEVE TURNBULL, LCMC BOARD OF TRUSTEES CHAIR

Readers of this publication are likely to believe that divine promises matter more than human pretensions. But that doesn't always settle things. Promises are only as good as the promiser.

There were a couple guys who took a sad walk a long time ago. They were headed for Emmaus, outside Jerusalem. They had gotten their hopes up about a character from Nazareth named Jesus. But as the football fans in Richmond could tell you, it's the hope that kills you. They met a stranger along the way and said as much. "We had hoped." We had hoped that Jesus would be the one to redeem Israel. Hope in the pluperfect is pretty bad. Apparently, the promiser hadn't been behind this promising young upstart from Galilee after

all. Or if he was, he lacked the power to accomplish his purpose. Maybe the word of God can be sent out and still return void. Either way, the hope had gone out.

Except. Except the stranger was a sign of something stranger than they could have imagined. It was Jesus right there in risen flesh. It was hope un hoped for. It wasn't even Saturday anymore except in their despair. It was Sunday already, and they didn't even know it yet. It was the eighth day of the week. Is that even possible? But the old order of things was passing away, and God was powerfully at work, even when their eyes were closed to see it.

Hallelujah, their eyes didn't remain closed. They were opened. The stranger stopped

with them and sat down at the Table together. And their eyes were opened in the breaking of the bread. Their eyes were opened to hope that would never have to go out again. A hope that wouldn't kill them, or ever die, even if it would at some times and in some places lead others to die for it. Their eyes were opened to see that his body was given for them. His blood had been shed for them. And now he walked alongside them. Christ died. Christ rose. And Christ will come again. The Promiser is good for it.

Maybe hope feels hard to come by for you too. Saturday can feel pretty dark and long. Sometimes even longer when our eyes can't see what's already true. There has never been a more hopeless place than the

garden outside the tomb of Jesus on Saturday. But there has never been a more hopeful place in all the world than the garden outside the tomb of Jesus on Sunday. And now we know that God is at work on Saturdays too, even when we can't see it.

Even more, Sunday is dawning among us. The time is nearer now than when we first believed. And in these last days God has given us his Holy Spirit, a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance to empower us for faith and service to one another. When all other lights have gone out, may God fill you with the light of hope and peace in Christ, forever and for now. ■

Trustees Gather in Prayer, Explore New Possibilities for LCMC's Future

BY ANNA TUCKER, LCMC BOARD OF TRUSTEES SECRETARY

The Board of Trustees met November 19-21, 2025 in Bloomington, MN to discuss the business of the association, however, business is never where we start or end our time together. That time is dedicated to God, to coming together around the Word and in prayer.

Each day begins with a devotion brought by one of the trustees. In November, we spent time in Mark 1, Galatians 5, and Mark 9, discussing our freedom in Christ, the importance of focusing on God's call, and noticing who or what is discipling us. This time in the Word centers us; it reminds us our help and hope come from God alone, not anything we plan or imagine, and helps us focus on why we're gathered together—not to simply

maintain an organization, but to keep the association centered on who we are—free in Christ, accountable to one another, rooted in Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, working together to fulfill the great commission.

Our job as a board is to keep those core values at the center and to remember that our purpose is to be obedient to God's call, not our own ideals, so we spend time with God before, after, and in the midst of our work.

During this meeting, the board reviewed and accepted the treasurer's report and had a conversation about the timing of the fiscal year, considering a possible shift, something that is being researched.

The trustees spent time onboarding and reviewing the

standing rules and operating procedures of the board, as well as record keeping for the board and the association.

We received seven US congregations and one international congregation as members of LCMC.

“Our relationship with God, our help and our hope, is the core of all the work we do as a board.”

The board did an in-depth review of the strategic plan, discussing each area of focus and its status.

The trustees debriefed the

2025 Annual Gathering and worked on planning the 2026 Annual Gathering, work that continues via email.

We discussed staff roles and granted bonuses to staff for their work during the transition year.

We also discussed some of the challenges of being an international association and designated a couple of trustees to explore this further.

The board discussed the vetting process for resource ministry partners.

After all the business, we closed in prayer, remembering again that our relationship with God, our help and our hope, is the core of all the work we do as a board. ■

LCMC Sees Strong Finish to 2025

BY CINDY GLESSNER, LCMC BOARD OF TRUSTEES TREASURER

2025 saw some significant changes for LCMC. A new service coordinator was named in response to Mike Bradley's retirement, and another assistant service coordinator joined the LCMC staff team. We celebrated our 25th anniversary as an association. And, as an association, we finished the year strong financially.

Giving was sufficient to cover all expenses, with funds left over for reserves or special projects. Expenses were well controlled, partly due to board meetings being held in Minneapolis, and partly due to the gathering being hosted at a church rather than a convention center.

We were able to help a number of church plants, and we

began working on a project that will make seminary debt relief funds available to more pastors with seminary debt.

We were also able to support our congregations by making health insurance plans and a great retirement plan program available to church staff members.

We look forward to what

2026 holds for us and appreciate your time, talent and treasure in support of initiatives aimed at making our member congregations as effective as possible in their communities. ■

For online giving, scan this QR code with your smartphone.



SCAN ME

Equipping Preachers, Sustaining Hope

BY WENDY POCH, LCMC MINISTRY BOARD CHAIR

Grace and peace to you in Jesus' name! One of my favorite Scripture verses is Hebrews 10:23, "Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful" (NIV). I especially love the word "unwaveringly."

Proverbs 4:27 says, "Do not swerve to the right or to the left; turn your foot away from evil." There are other places in Scripture that command us to remain faithful to God's Word and warn of the dangers of turning to the right or the left.

Biblical hope is future-oriented, yet grounded in God's past and present faithfulness. Our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness. Our hope is grounded in the fact that He is risen (how many of you just responded to

that acclamation in your head?!)! And our hope is grounded in the fact that Christ is risen for YOU.

In your baptism, God claimed you as His, marked you with the cross of Christ, and sealed you in the Holy Spirit. He has promised to be with you always. In Holy Communion, we receive the body and blood of Jesus, so we can be assured of our forgiveness and of God's love for us and strengthened by Christ Himself. That is God's present faithfulness as well as the assurance of His future faithfulness.

In this day and age, with so much turmoil and unrest, how can we ensure that the good news of God's presence and His faithfulness is always proclaimed? How can we encourage

one another to cling unwaveringly to the hope we profess without being pulled one way or another due to headlines in the news?

The first step is to call and train a preacher. Notice I didn't say "pastor." We are part of the priesthood of all believers TOGETHER!

If your congregation doesn't have a pastor, you can send members to an online, extremely affordable, lay-preaching course that will prepare them well. St. Paul Lutheran Seminary provides regular opportunities for this. You can learn more about this course on their website.

If you have a pastor, encourage them to take a continuing education class at one of the seminaries or ministry training

schools with which LCMC has a working relationship. Even a single class per year can refresh, strengthen, and encourage your pastor, regardless of their credentials.

The Ministry Board encourages all pastors to continue their education so they can serve their congregations in the best possible way. Together, we can hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for He who promised is faithful. ■

To learn more about lay preaching courses at Saint Paul Lutheran Seminary, go to semic.org/congregational-resources. For more information about seminary education in LCMC, go to www.lcmc.net/seminaries.



Discover an
all-new show
TableCast





CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT WHERE LEADERS THRIVE

How better communication between pastors and church councils can reduce conflict and lead to more effective collaboration. By Brodie Taphorn and Christian Huntley.

Church councils and pastors share a common mission: proclaiming the Gospel and caring for the congregation. But let's be honest—sometimes the lines blur. Who decides what? Who carries which load? When roles aren't clear, even the most faithful teams can feel like they're paddling in circles.

Start with Clarity

Think of your council and pastor as co-captains of the same boat. Your congregation's governing documents (church constitution & bylaws) likely spell out what roles and responsibilities each captain is responsible for. When everyone knows their lane, the journey is smoother. A simple exercise? Write down what falls under "pastoral leadership" and what

belongs to "council governance." Then talk it through. Consider regular council training on roles and responsibilities. Clarity isn't just helpful—it sets people free.

Annual Reviews: Not Just for Corporations

We know, "annual review" sounds about as exciting as a root canal. But done well, it's a gift. A review isn't a performance critique, it's a conversation. Is the pastor thriving? Where does the council see opportunities for growth? What support is needed? This mutual check-in builds trust and prevents surprises. Plus, it's a chance to celebrate wins and mourn the losses. It gives the church council an opportunity to let the pastor know, "We are in this together!"

Encourage Self-Care and Retreats

Pastors pour themselves out for others. If their spiritual well runs dry, the whole congregation feels it. Councils can champion self-care by budgeting for retreats, sabbaticals, and regular days off. Ask your pastor, "What fills your soul?" Then help make it happen. A rested pastor is a better pastor—and a healthier church follows.

Keep It Human

At the end of the day, pastors aren't superheroes. They're people—just like everyone else—and they need encouragement, boundaries, and grace. A handwritten note, a coffee gift card, or a heartfelt "thank you" goes further than you think. Ministry is demanding; kindness is fuel.

The Big Picture

Supporting your pastor isn't about doing more—it's about doing what matters. Clear roles prevent confusion. Reviews foster growth. Retreats restore energy. And encouragement reminds us why we serve: because Christ first served us.

So everyone take a breath. We are not just managing budgets and bylaws—we are shaping a culture where pastors and church councils can flourish. And when they flourish, the Gospel shines brighter in our communities. ■

If you would like help with church council training for your congregation, reach out to LCMC Associate Service Coordinator Brodie Taphorn at brodie@lcmc.net.



THE POWER OF EXPERIENCE IN PASTORAL DISCERNMENT

By Christian Huntley

Each week, my phone rings with a familiar kind of call. Sometimes it's a pastor approaching retirement, wondering what comes next for their congregation. Other times it's a call committee trying to read the landscape and asking the question almost everyone asks first: "Are there pastors available?" It's an honest question. It's also a complicated one. Yes, there are pastors, but the trends are shifting.

You may also hear that seminaries are shutting down left and right. It's true that some are shrinking or consolidating, but

*"This is not a time for fear.
It's a time for faithfulness,
creativity, courage,
generosity, and imagination.
Most of all, it's a time to
remember that God has not
stopped calling pastors."*

LCMC has relationships with excellent seminaries who are growing, that remain strong, faithful institutions continuing to

train leaders for the Church.

But here's the part that is true: There are fewer seminary-trained pastors entering parish ministry, and calls are taking longer to fill. Congregations often feel this firsthand. What once took nine months may now take twenty-four or thirty-six. A call committee that expected a dozen candidates may receive just a handful.

And yet, God continues to raise up faithful and gifted leaders and pastors. Good candidates are there. They're serving, discerning, and preparing. The challenge is that there simply aren't as many of them as there used to be. Which means the question we really need to ask is not just, "Are there pastors available?" but, "What can we do—right now—to help raise up the next generation of pastors?"

Give People Experience

One of the greatest gifts a congregation can give a potential leader is experience.

Think about the early Church: Paul had Timothy. Barnabas had Mark. These younger leaders didn't emerge fully formed, they were invited, encouraged, and trusted long before they led churches of their own.

That's where every congregation—large or small, rural or urban—can make a difference today.

Raise Up and Engage Local Leaders

Every congregation has people with gifts. Very often, future pastors are already sitting in the pews. And the best way to help someone discern that calling is simple: invite them to lead. That might look like:

- Giving students opportunities to read Scripture in worship
- Letting aspiring leaders teach a class or lead a devotional
- Inviting someone to preach on Sunday or during Lent
- Encouraging participation in worship planning and leading
- Encouraging promising leaders to take a preaching course
- Empowering lay leaders to guide ministries
- Taking leaders on care and communion visits

But experience isn't only about Sunday mornings. Sometimes the clearest moments of calling happen on a mountaintop—literally.

Camps are not just for kids. Some of my favorite memories are father-son weekends at Okoboji. I was a summer camper too.

Get adults and students on mission trips. Encourage retreats. Create experiences where all ages encounter God's work firsthand. These moments shape leaders. They awaken callings. They give the Holy Spirit room to speak.

These leaders will be ready to help lead when congregations are in seasons of pastoral transition.

Begin Planning Now for an Internship

More congregations across LCMC are investing in internship programs again.

And every time a church takes that step, it impacts not only the intern, but the whole association. Meaningful congregational experience helps seminarians and those discerning a vocational call learn the rhythms of ministry. Internships require leadership commitment, intentional planning, and sustained financial investment. But churches of all sizes can do this creatively. Ask yourselves:

- Does the congregation have leaders who can mentor and assist?
- Does someone in the congregation have a spare apartment or guest house to help with housing costs?
- Are there part-time jobs in the community that could support a bi-vocational intern?
- Could we create a designated fund over the next year to prepare for this?

An internship doesn't need to be perfect, it just needs to be possible.

If Your Congregation Can't Host Them, Send Them Somewhere That Can

Not every church is positioned to host an intern or nurture a leader directly. That's okay.

In Acts, the congregation in Antioch prayed for Paul and Barnabas, laid hands on them, and sent them out. Their ministry reached far beyond the walls of one local church, yet it was that community's faithfulness that launched it.

If you have someone discerning ministry but your church isn't ready for the next step:

- Connect them with a neighboring congregation that is ready
- Explore pulpit supply opportunities nearby
- Look into Greenhouse experiences in Minnesota or California
- Encourage bi-vocational calls locally
- Help them enroll in seminary or pastoral formation programs

Sending and encouraging is just as important as hosting.

The Best Time to Prepare Is Now

Whether your congregation is in a call process, preparing for retirement transitions, or thinking ahead, one truth remains: the best time to prepare for pastoral transition is before you need it. When we invest in leaders today — teenagers, retirees, mid-career adults, new believers, lifelong members — we're planting seeds for the Church of tomorrow.

This is not a time for fear. It's a time for faithfulness, creativity, courage, generosity, and imagination. Most of all, it's a time to remember that God has not stopped calling pastors. He is still speaking, still stirring hearts, still raising up leaders for the beautiful, demanding, joyful work of shepherding God's people.

Our role—and our privilege—is to help them hear that call. ■



PHOTO CONTEST

By Kristy Thomas

Each year, Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ's photo contest invites congregations to capture moments that reflect the spirit of compassion and the life of the local church.

Throughout 2025, LCMC congregations stepped up to help serve some of the most vulnerable members of society, support their local communities, and teach the gospel.

In a world that can often feel divided, their photos and stories serve as a reminder that faith still continues to bring people together in meaningful and lasting ways.

As you view this year's photo contest entries, we invite you to look beyond the images themselves and consider the stories behind them. They are a testament to what can happen when people come together with a shared purpose and a commitment to generosity.

Below and Right: St Paul Lutheran Church and St Johns Lutheran Church, both located in Springfield, MN, team up to work at Feed My Starving Children in the Twin Cities.







Top Left: Children from the VBS program at Trinity Lutheran Church (Great Bend, KS) raise money to support their local zoo, which offers free admission to the community.



Top Center: Children from the VBS program at Peace Lutheran Church (Watertown, MN) pose with a giant spider. The theme of last year's program was "magnified".

Top Right: Kaden Leingang, a member of the youth group at Inspire Family Fellowship (Bismarck, ND) situates himself on a rock for daily morning devotional time at Nebwyodak Bible Camp. Nebwyodak is a week long bible camp in the blackhills of South Dakota that Inspire attends every year. Photo by Ben Peske.



Bottom Left: A student from Rushford Lutheran Church (Rushford, MN) embraces a woman while on a service trip in Philadelphia. While visiting St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Frankford, the group learned about the laundry and shower ministries St. Mark's has in place to serve unhoused members of the community. They also heard testimony from a woman who, after losing her daughter to the streets, now serves daily in Kensington, delivering food and water to people battling opioid addiction, making sure to look them in the eyes so they know that someone sees them.



Bottom Center: Trinity Lutheran Church teamed up with United Methodist Church (both of Great Bend, KS) to provide a meal for student athletes at Barton County Community College. Many student athletes here do not have access to transportation and are expected to be to school before the cafeteria opens for the day.



Bottom Right: Jesse Hetletved hypes up the crowd before taking part in a pie eating contest at Inspire Family Fellowship's annual block party in Bismarck, ND. Each year, the block party provides a fun activity for the community with things like inflatables, carnival games, and food. Photo by Ben Peske.

Top Right: Members of St. Peter's Lutheran Church (Marion, WI) pray over a fire truck from the Marion Area Fire Department. The congregation hosted an appreciation dinner and worship service for first responders and their families as a thank you for serving the community.

Center Left: After reviving their quilt ministry in recent years, veteran members of the Women of the Word group at Trinity Lutheran Church (Bruning, NE) create quilts with the help of youth and other women in the congregation. The group donates blankets to homeless shelters, first responders, domestic violence shelters, HeadStart, and various organizations that work with refugees, foster children, and victims of disasters. Since 2024 they have donated over 200 blankets.

Center Right Our Saviour's Lutheran Church and First English Lutheran Church, both of Victoria, TX, team up to help a neighbor in need. Together, they painted a fence and made repairs to the entrance of a nearby home.

Bottom: A group from The WHY Church (Elk River, MN) prepares to leave for an 8-day mission trip to serve people in Appalachia. "We began the journey together by van until reaching northern Kentucky, where we divided into two teams," said Aaron

Marsh, a staff member at The WHY Church. "One team continued on to southeastern Kentucky to partner with the local church, serving the community of McCreary County for the second consecutive year and building on relationships already established. The other team traveled to the Nashville, TN area to attend the YMCA Youth Unify Conference, a movement of young people focused on bringing Christ back into the YMCA. In addition, this group also served the homeless population in Nashville." ■

Entry forms for our 2026 photo contest will be available on our blog and in our e-newsletter this summer. We will make an announcement when the entry period is open. Stay tuned!



THE FARMERS OF LCMC

Rooted in faith and strengthened by community, this Michigan congregation has been sowing the seeds of hope for generations. By Kristy Thomas.

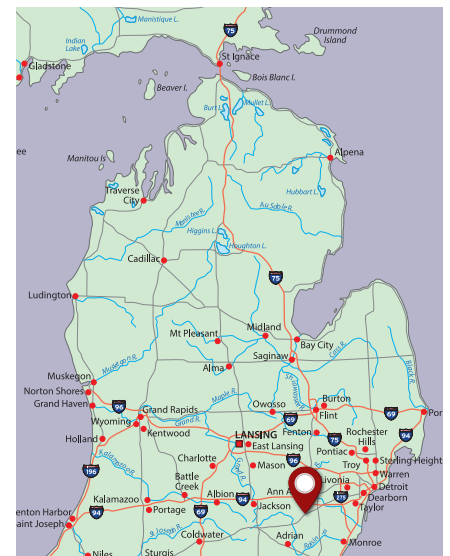


Last Sunday, Erica Drake asked the children in her Sunday school class if they would ever sell their siblings. The question was intended to serve as nothing more than a silly ice-breaker to accompany a class discussion on Joseph and his coat of many colors, but instead, it offered her an in-depth look at the hearts and minds of an up-and-coming generation.

“They took it way more seriously than I had,” she said. “I thought we were gonna share a laugh about it, and they all had very thoughtful responses as to why they would not sell their sibling, even if they didn’t like them every day.”

Working with youth, Drake says, is what gives her hope for the future. “I’ve done a lot of leadership centered around youth, both at church and throughout our communities in agriculture and 4H and things like that.”

A focus on the future and on taking the time to build meaningful relationships with others in the local community is a mindset that has prevailed in her home congregation for generations.



Your Future Pastor

St. John's Pastor Drex Morton shares his top four characteristics to look for in a future church leader.

Compassion.

Compassion is not only an ability to show empathy, but a willingness to demonstrate support and take action for others when needed.

Humility. A great church leader is not motivated by collecting achievements or appearing to be the best, but by finding joy and fulfillment in helping others.

A Good Listener.

A good listener takes the time to hear the concerns of others, provides thoughtful answers to questions, and has an ability to read people.

Lived Experience.

Actively raising up leaders from your own congregation means your next pastor will probably have a working knowledge of your congregation's dynamics, as well as an understanding of the needs and culture of your local community.

Homegrown Leaders

St. John's Lutheran Church, nestled along the side of a quiet two lane road amongst sprawling fields and quaint farmhouses in the township of Bridgewater, MI, is a small LCMC congregation of 90. It has served as a place where multi-generational families can gather together, not only as a place of worship, but as a place to build relationships, since the 1800s.

"I was born into this church. I am 28, so I've been here my whole life," said Drake. "The fact that most people have known me since I was a baby is really cool because they'll, you know, share something about when I was yag big, or they aren't shocked when I show up in a cow suit," she says. "But also, I feel like that's one of the biggest challenges because, you know, everybody's known you since you were a baby. Now you're the Sunday School teacher for their children and their grandchildren, and the perspective and the mindset change. Like, how do I make sure that I'm continuing on?"

It's an experience she shares with fellow church members Louise St. Clair and Keith Weidmayer, both of whom were born into the congregation and went on to serve in various leadership capacities over the years.

"We say we're a family and we are," Weidmayer says. "I was born and raised here, baptized here. My parents were here, my grandpa and my grandma when they got married."

But beyond the time they share together sitting in the pews on Sunday or volunteering their time, there's something else they have in common: they're all farmers.

The Life of a Farmer

The life of a farmer is a busy one, but for the right kind of person,



it's a labor of love.

A typical workday for Drake begins at 6:30 A.M., when she works on safety and stability projects for the municipal water department. When her shift is over, she heads back home to work on the farm, where her family raises beef cattle and grows corn, beans, barley, and hay. She also serves as a 4H leader for her county, and as chair of the young farmer group in the Washtenaw County Farm Bureau. "My calendar is pretty full," she admits.

Drake is also active at the Saline Fair. "A couple years ago, I tap danced to the Boot Scoot'n Boogie in a pig costume on the talent show stage. Somebody said I bet you won't, and said I bet you I will," she explains.

St. Clair, an award winning homemaker at the Saline Fair and the wife of a retired pastor, likes to start mornings off by sharing a homemade breakfast,

coffee and tea, and a word of prayer with her husband. Next, they head out to tackle the day's workload, which typically varies based on the season.

"What do I love about farming? I don't know, just about most things," she says. "I did some milking for a while. That was probably not my favorite thing to do, but I enjoyed being on the tractor, mowing or raking hay, things like that. Just the smell, and being outside, and I don't know, looking at all of God's creation."

For 60 years, the St. Clairs sold produce at the Ann Arbor Farmer's Market, but in recent years, they have simplified their farming operations.

While she still enjoys gardening and preserving homegrown food, a less intense workload means more time for baking, doing household projects, and spending quality time with her children and grandchildren.



“Yesterday we had the whole gang over to do Valentine cookies, so that was what we like to call controlled chaos,” she says.

For Weidmayer, who lives and works on the farm that has been in his family for 150 years, the pace of life can be intense, with workweeks often clocking in at 80 to 90 hours.

“I’m a dairy farmer, so I get up at 6:00 every morning. I milk 70 cows, and I raise all the females’ calves. All the females that are born I keep, so I have probably 125 to 130 animals on my farm. So my normal day is milking for about an hour and a half every morning, then all the animals are fed, bedded, and taken care of,” he said.

After 7 to 8 hours of day-to-day farm chores, Weidmayer often tackles additional tasks that vary by season, such as maintenance and repairs on farm equipment, cultivating 400 acres of crops—mostly to feed his

animals—and chopping wood to heat his house. “It is very much an intense thing,” he said.

While the workload of a farmer can be daunting, finding

“I have a plaque in my kitchen that I see all the time and it says, ‘Who plants the seed beneath the sod and waits to see believes in God.’”

joy in the work he does and his relationships with others helps power him through. “I mean, I enjoy farming because I like the community. It is very much a community atmosphere, just like this church is.”

Finding Strength in Community

Farming offers many benefits, such as the ability to rely on technology as much or as little as desired, as well as freedom from typical workplace stressors like long commutes and annoying co-workers. However,

running a farm certainly comes with its own set of challenges.

“You can’t control the weather, for one thing. That’s a big thing,” St. Clair says. “But you [also] can’t control the price of the things you buy, and you can’t control the price of the things you sell.”

“Farming is the only occupation where they tell you what they’re going to give you for your crop,” explains Weidmayer. “I grow corn, and two years ago—they pay us per bushel—it was \$6 a bushel. Last year, it was \$3.80. So our inputs have gone up, and what we’re selling it for has gone way down.”

This lack of predictability can threaten a farmer’s livelihood, but it also serves as a reminder of the importance of faith and community.

“Well, the church, for me, it’s very important. It’s my life almost. I mean, I can’t imagine not having the church here and the people that, you know, that support you,” St. Clair says.

“And when things happen, you know, as they are bound to do—illnesses or you know, break a leg, or for some reason can’t do things—it’s just amazing to

loves about working with youth, their inquisitive nature tops the list. What many may see as a challenge to deal with, she sees as a reflection of their interest and curiosity.

“The really digging deep into understanding something has brought me a lot of hope recently for the future and what we have coming with wonderful leaders and youth in our community,” she says. “It’s something that has been very impactful for me in life, and it’s something that, growing up in the church and with my family on the farm, we were always allowed to ask questions, even if the question was number eighty-six of the day and seemed really, really, really ridiculous.”

Drake’s ability to listen is a quality that St. John’s Pastor Drex Morton appreciates as he looks ahead to the future. “I think the key thing is to identify people in a congregation who might have the gift of ministry without even knowing it,” he said. “Erica has a call in her life. It’s very clear to me that she should be in rural ministry because she understands rural ministry and she would do a wonderful job of preaching the gospel.”

He also encourages congregations to look for leaders from within. “I think what we need in LCMC is to raise up a model of leadership from within the church. And without sacrificing our Lutheran theology—because I’m very Lutheran—I think that we probably could do that on a local level, or by having a couple of churches within close proximity cooperate in raising up leadership.”

Like farming, helping future leaders grow requires hard work, time, and faith. “I have a plaque in my kitchen that I see all the time and it says, ‘Who plants the seed beneath the sod and waits to see believes in God,’” says St. Clair. ■

A Bright Future
Of all the things that Drake



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Who We Are: We are an association of congregations and individuals who are free in Christ, accountable to one another, rooted in Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, and working to fulfill Christ's Great Commission and go make disciples of all nations.



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