## TABLE OF CONTENTS

**CERTAINTY IN AN UNCERTAIN WORLD**

**Rev. Dr. Matthew C. Harrison**

LCMS PRESIDENT

1

**Rev. Kevin D. Robson**

LCMS CHIEF MISSION OFFICER

Interview ................................................................. 4

Looking Forward .................................................. 6

**Rev. Daniel F. McMiller**

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, LCMS OFFICE OF INTERNATIONAL MISSION

Interview ................................................................. 9

Looking Forward .................................................. 11

**Rev. Robert Zagore**

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, LCMS OFFICE OF NATIONAL MISSION

Interview ................................................................. 14

Looking Forward .................................................. 16

**Rev. Dr. James A. Baneck**

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, LCMS OFFICE OF PASTORAL EDUCATION

Interview ................................................................. 19

Looking Forward .................................................. 21

**Frank Simek**

LCMS CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER/
INTERIM LCMS CHIEF FINANCIAL OFFICER

**Ross A. Stroh**

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, LCMS ACCOUNTING

Interview ................................................................. 25

Fiscal Year 2020 Financial Report ................................. 26

**Mark D. Hofman**

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, LCMS MISSION ADVANCEMENT

Interview ................................................................. 28

Looking Forward .................................................. 29
CERTAINTY IN AN UNCERTAIN WORLD

Rev. Dr. Matthew C. Harrison

LCMS President

The times are disturbing. I do not know or understand the hidden will of God. Why does God allow the church, especially in the West, to continue to decline? Why does our world sink into ever deeper depravity, division and even mayhem? Why has the world turned so hostile to the Gospel and the Word of God? Why does the Gospel find impenetrable rocky soil in places where it once was planted and prospered? Why has church planting proved so difficult in the past decades? Why have so many turned from the Good News to nihilism, or to a “spiritual” religion of the self, void of any biblical content?

We’ve constantly been drawn to look to ourselves for the answers. We’ve lacked zeal. We’ve been fearful. We’ve failed to reach out. We’ve lacked the right methods. We’ve been too strict. We’ve not been strict enough. We’ve had the wrong emphasis. We’ve been too “Lutheran.” We’ve not been Lutheran enough. We haven’t had the right kind of seminary education. We need the right leadership. As Hermann Sasse once said about the decline of Lutheranism in Germany, “Our witness was too weak.” I suppose all of this is true, in some fashion or other. The Law always accuses. And yet, as Luther wrote in the first of his 95 Theses so long ago, “The entire life of the Christian is to be one of repentance.” As he told a despairing friend, “Christ dwells only in sinners.” One thing’s sure. We are sinners.

But there’s more than meets the eye in matters of Christ’s kingdom. While there is truth in the above, God Himself, who wills that all come to the knowledge of faith in Christ and be saved, hardens hard hearts (like Pharaoh), allows entire churches, nations and peoples to turn from the Gospel when they’ve insisted on doing so. We are in the midst of spiritual and demonic forces. Yet we should not be surprised. The Lord Himself told us it would be so. “For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect” (MATT. 24:24). “And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (MATT. 24:12–14).

Note: Tough times are prophesied by Christ. However, the Gospel will continue to be preached to all nations. Only then will the end come. We are in that time now. How can we endure? How can we find the fortitude to carry on? How can we know with clarity the tasks which we must perform by Christ’s power and at His direction?

The answer: In these uneasy and uncertain times, we have absolute certainty in Christ. The Son of Man came that “you will know the truth, and truth will set you free” (JOHN 8:32). Psalm 19:7 says, “The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple.” “Law” here (in the “broad sense”) includes not only the Ten Commandments, but also the whole “Torah” or the “whole council of God,” in which the Gospel predominates. We find certainty in the six main doctrines of the Bible as summarized in the Small Catechism (SC).
The Ten Commandments. “None is righteous, no, not one” (Rom. 3:10). It’s very clear and immovably certain. Measured against the Law (in the “narrow sense”), we are all sinners in need of forgiveness. No one is excluded. Every sinful thought, word and deed is condemned. The Law is given “so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God” (Rom. 3:19).

The Creed. First Article. The Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, has created us body and soul. There’s no creaturely existence aside from the body we’ve been given, male or female. The Bible is crystal clear on this. Second Article. Jesus “has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity” (SC). All of this is as certain and sure as Jesus Christ Himself. “The blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:7). “We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul” (Heb. 6:19).

Third Article. Faith in Jesus comes only by the work of the Holy Spirit. “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him.” We have absolutely nothing to do with it! The Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, sanctifies us and keeps us with Jesus in the one true faith. And that is for certain!

The Lord’s Prayer. Jesus commands us to pray. He invites us to pray. He even gives us words to pray in the Lord’s Prayer: “Our Father who art in heaven.” “With these words God tenderly invites us to believe that He is our true Father and that we are His true children, so that with all boldness and confidence we may ask Him as dear children ask their dear father” (SC). Our prayers in the name of Jesus are certainly heard and answered. Even more than that, Jesus is constantly praying for us. “I do not ask for these only [the apostles], but also for those who will believe in me through their word” (John 17:20). And even when we are so exasperated and weak that we do not even know what or how to pray, “the Spirit himself intercedes for us” (Rom. 8:26). Certainty!

Holy Baptism. “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38–29). Baptism is the Gospel. Paul repeatedly says that in Baptism, we are joined with Christ so that His death for sins is ours, and His resurrection is ours. “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Gal. 3:27). No matter what happens in this life, we say with Luther, “Nevertheless, I am baptized.” My experience, my flesh, the devil may shout aloud, “God does not love you!” Baptism speaks otherwise. Baptism is God’s act, and thus it is sure and certain.

Confession and Absolution. Christ’s own sure words give this blessing to us. “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them” (John 20:23). “I believe that when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command … and absolve those who repent of their sins and want to do better, this is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself” (SC). Can’t get more certain than that!
Lord’s Supper. “Take and eat. This is My body, given and shed for you, for the forgiveness of sins.” We can be absolutely certain that we receive Christ’s very sacramental body and blood, that same body and blood which hung on the cross — in a miraculous way I cannot fathom — and in receiving them by faith, our sins are forgiven. We can be as certain of this as Christ’s own words are certainly true.

This is the certainty we need now and always, come what may. Because we are certain of this Gospel, we go forth and work for the extension of Christ’s own kingdom. This happens most importantly in every single congregation of the LCMS, no matter how grand or tiny. The Synod exists to this end, assisting congregations in extending the reach, providing services to encourage pastors and teachers and church workers in their vital vocations. We exist to encourage and equip laypeople in living Christian lives and giving witness to the Gospel. We send missionaries around the world. We support our seminaries in providing preachers. We work to ensure the Gospel is the heart of every institution connected with the church, whether universities or homes for the care of the aged. Together we provide vast resources, so that local congregations and districts can care for those suffering disaster or calamity, all in the clear and spoken name of Jesus, the Savior. Together we provide care and encouragement for church workers, evangelism tools, life ministries, support for schools and more. And we are world leaders among many church partners, assisting all in confessing Christ to the nations.

Why? I think Ephesians 2 sums it up well: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” (EPH. 2:8–10).

We know full well that the most vital work of the church occurs in congregations. The following report is given that you might know the work we do together for the benefit of all in sharing the Gospel, “to the end of the age” (MATT. 28:20).


Pastor Matthew C. Harrison
AN INTERVIEW WITH

Rev. Kevin D. Robson

LCMS Chief Mission Officer

BY ROY S. ASKINS

“COVID-19 has forced some changes upon us that we would have never otherwise experienced,” said the Rev. Kevin D. Robson, chief mission officer of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS). The pandemic has provided both blessings and challenges to the LCMS’ work over the last six months. “We are sorely missing face-to-face interactions between working colleagues who are a lot like family, which is so vital to the church in general, but especially for our team’s work in the LCMS International Center,” he said. “We need to see each other; we need to be in each other’s presence.”

As with many other organizations, the pandemic restrictions forced the LCMS to shift workers out of the International Center to work at home. This hinders the informal meetings of the workplace and substitutes spontaneous discussion with dry, formal video conferences and meetings.

Robson contrasts this with the living, breathing nature of the church on the move: “When God calls us together as the church, as one body, that organic unity moves together in a continuous, synchronized harmony. ... We have missed that greatly.”

The lack of face-to-face interaction has created challenges for fundraising and LCMS international mission work. For example, pre-COVID, caring for the donors who make the LCMS’ work possible took the form of regular in-person meetings. International mission work also depends on personal interaction and conversation. The wide variety of government restrictions and health care capacities of the countries in which our international missionaries work created significant challenges in providing for them.

The lack of face-to-face interaction also slowed implementation of the Making Disciples for Life (MDFL) mission emphasis adopted by the LCMS in the 2019 convention. Physical meetings to foster conversation between church leaders, pastors and laity are a foundational aspect of MDFL. In January, the LCMS successfully completed a proof-of-concept gathering and was preparing to replicate that conference with additional features and improvements.

“We have not been able to present a follow-on face-to-face MDFL gathering since that initial proof-of-concept conference,” Robson said. However, “we’re working through creative means to accomplish that electronically with upcoming conference gatherings.”

Finding “creative means” to address challenges describes much of the LCMS’ work over the last eight months. Despite the lack of face-to-face interaction, Robson reports that Mission Advancement, the Office of International Mission and the Office of National Mission have all continued the work assigned to them. Donors have been cared for and most of the LCMS’ 115 missionary families remained deployed.
The pandemic has also brought new opportunities to the LCMS, particularly in the area of schools. “One of the unanticipated outcomes of the pandemic has been a keen interest in local communities in our Lutheran schools and enrolling students in our Lutheran schools,” Robson said. “I think that’s because of our determination to keep our schools open and functioning in live format.”

The three international schools operated by the LCMS — Concordia International School Shanghai, Concordia International School Hanoi and Hong Kong International School — have dealt with similar challenges to schools in the United States. All three schools have full enrollment, and though “the course of instruction at times has been online only, we were prepared for and have seen a return to the classroom in all three schools, working within local health department restrictions,” said Robson.

In all the challenges the LCMS has faced, Robson reports no hiccups. “Even in the work from home environment, it has been clear to me that our staff has been putting in enormous hours,” he said. “That’s a reflection of their willingness to sacrifice and their commitment to the Synod’s common mission here.”
State of the Synod

BY REV. KEVIN D. ROBSON

As a team member of the LCMS Office of the President, the chief mission officer (CMO) is responsible to the president for the supervision, cross-coordination and resourcing of five principal mission and ministry units — the Office of International Mission (OIM), the Office of National Mission (ONM), the Office of Pastoral Education (PED), Mission Advancement (MADV) and Communications (COMMS) — all working at the president’s direction and in fulfillment of the ends policies established by the Boards for International and National Mission (BIM and BNM), and numerous mandates coming out of every Synod national convention (the most recent of which took place July 2019 in Tampa). In the current fiscal year 2021 ending June 30, these five units, plus the CMO’s office, BIM and BNM, will account for 75% of the Synod’s total operating expense budget of over $59 million (OIM alone accounting for 39% of that figure) and about 36% of the Synod’s spending from unrestricted revenues.

In all of these collaborative efforts, our overarching objective is to pursue with fervent prayer, energy and thoughtfulness our Synod’s officially adopted mission and ministry emphasis for the 2019–21 triennium, *Making Disciples for Life*, accompanied by seven mission priorities affirmed in 2019 convention Resolution 4-03A:

- Plant, sustain, and revitalize Lutheran churches;
- Support and expand theological education;
- Perform human care in close proximity to Word and Sacrament ministries;
- Collaborate with the Synod’s members and partners to enhance mission effectiveness;
- Promote and nurture the spiritual, emotional, financial, and physical well-being of pastors and professional church workers;
- Enhance early childhood education, elementary and secondary education, and youth ministry; and
- Strengthen and support the Lutheran family in living out God’s design.

Resolution 4-03A also instructed ONM and OIM, “under ends policies established by the BNM and BIM, to resource congregations, schools, circuits and districts to do the following:

- Evangelize and disciple the lost;
- Retain the faithful;
- Strengthen congregations and schools;
- Plant new congregations and schools wherever possible, especially in urban and multi-cultural communities; and
- Engage in international mission in partnership with the Office of International Mission.”
All of the foregoing represents no small undertaking in an uncertain forecasting environment created by pandemic pressures, the outcomes of U.S. national elections, economic doubts, increasing hostility toward Christianity, social unrest and LCMS demographic trends indicating overall declining numbers of congregants in LCMS pews. Nevertheless, under God’s blessing and guidance, we have and will continue to operate — with utmost efficiency and under a shared vision, mission and strategy — a global mission, ministry and mercy enterprise, strongly supported by a networked constellation of Synod stakeholders, U.S. and overseas. Though the LCMS is a large, complex organization, our goal — from the International Center in St. Louis and through four regional offices around the globe — is simply to support all of the Synod’s members and deliver on their expectations, responding to the current climate of rapidly changing opportunities with flexibility, speed and all the marks of a high-trust, mutually supportive, well-integrated team.

We look upon the opportunities that are facing us — and the daunting challenges accompanying them — not with a spirit of timidity or anxiety or a “woe is us” attitude. Our neighbors, a multitude of human souls in countless places here in the U.S. and around the globe, are crying out for hope — a genuine hope that we know is solely given from God in the Gospel of Christ. What we have so freely received we are determined to hand over to others, for as we confess with St. Paul, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith’” (ROM. 1:16–17). We never lose such hope, but boldly reaffirm our commitment to our callings under His mission, knowing that “God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ … [We] encourage one another and build one another up … Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 THESS. 5:9, 11A, 16–18).

Our chief objective, therefore, is never to downsize but to extend the mission of the church and the global reach of the Gospel. But please note that when we say, “extend,” we do not mean “build a larger, unwieldy, less efficient organization”! This calls for prayer, creativity and the strongest possible planning, coordination and execution of our collective work at a time when resources available to national Synod are seemingly harder to come by. And it means that all Synod leadership and staff, now more than ever, needs to continue to:

1. **Practice excellence in stewardship** of existing assets — especially in finance and human resources — and maximize the impact of every dollar spent and every manhour committed, “[collaborating] with the Synod’s members and partners to enhance mission effectiveness” (the Synod’s fourth mission priority, see listing above);

2. **Seek and see new opportunities** through a proactive visionary lens (years and decades out) and not from a task-oriented, reactionary perspective; and then

3. **Take an intentionally rigorous and disciplined approach** — strategic and theologically sound, never manipulative! — to **drive the Synod’s response to her members’ expressed, explicit needs** deep and wide and **deliver her mission and ministry services** throughout the entire global base of the Synod’s participating members, church workers, volunteers, supporters and contributors.

As we strive toward such organizational goals, we’ll continue to remain alert to the potential pitfalls of unintended internal competition or discoordination between national Synod and the vast array of her agencies and related entities. In order to resolve uneconomical re-duplication of efforts, confusing collisions in the fundraising arena and perplexity among our partners (especially our international church partners), we encourage those within the Synod family toward positive collaboration and partnership … while all of us do our work with unmatched excellence and efficiency. In the ONM, OIM, PED, MADV and COMS, we’re committed to deliver on our objectives in such a manner that others are inspired to consider the
capacity and expertise of our five principal mission and ministry units before “reinventing the wheel” or striking out on their own into places where the national Synod is already doing the very things that have been assigned in the Handbook or by convention action, and under the direction of the president and our two mission boards.

These are lofty goals, but the Lord of the church and His mission are infinitely greater. And He will bless our efforts as we persist in our callings and abide in His Word. “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (HEB. 12:1-2).
The COVID-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on the church, especially in overseas witness and mercy. For the Synod’s missionaries and partner churches, many things came to a sudden halt as governments imposed shutdowns and other restrictions.

Although the vast majority of the Synod’s 115 missionaries chose to remain in place, the LCMS Office of International Mission (OIM) assisted about a dozen missionary families in returning temporarily to the United States due to health and safety concerns.

“Our missionaries are continually monitored for updates on their circumstances,” said the Rev. Daniel F. McMiller, executive director of the OIM. Missionary care became more important than ever during the pandemic, and OIM staff ramped up spiritual, mental and emotional, logistical, and professional development support for missionaries.

“The missionaries have been very resilient, very committed,” McMiller commented. “They saw this as an opportunity to do personal enrichment, reading and studying, continuing education, as well as finally getting to projects that might not have been at the top of their priority list before.”

While in-person ministry was most affected, translation and resource development continued with little interruption. McMiller is excited about the progress made on the Livonian Lutheran Project in Latvia. Two missionaries are working to create a fully accredited bachelor’s degree in Lutheran theology there, taught entirely in English. The pandemic forced the program to shift online, opening it up to students from an even greater geographic area. The first beta course started in late September with 39 students from 12 countries.

“This is going to be a model or template that can be used abroad anywhere English is used,” McMiller said.

Despite COVID-19, the Synod’s missionaries also continued reaching out to their neighbors as they were able. Last fiscal year, the OIM gave out 92 grants totaling $2.5 million to support disaster recovery and mercy projects around the world.

Although ongoing travel restrictions impacted missionaries’ home service and support-raising schedules, McMiller reports that the impact hasn’t been as significant as initially feared. “No one is in danger of having to come home” due to lack of funding, he said.

The OIM also oversees a robust short-term mission program, which was greatly impacted by the pandemic. Twenty-eight mission trips had to be canceled, and OIM staff shifted their efforts to finding ways that people could volunteer without ever leaving home. One result was an online program that matched...
English-speaking volunteers from the U.S. with people desiring to practice English in other countries. Overall, 150 LCMS members volunteered with the OIM in some capacity.

LCMS Ministry to the Armed Forces (MAF) also falls under the OIM’s purview. Although the pandemic disrupted MAF’s ability to conduct in-person visits and organize training events for the Synod’s 180 career and Reserve chaplains, it did not stop staff members from continuing to provide care and counsel to chaplains via the internet and phone. MAF also continued its work of reviewing applications and endorsing new LCMS chaplains for service to the country’s servicemen and women.

Despite the impact of COVID-19 on the Synod’s missionaries, short-term mission teams and military chaplains, McMiller is optimistic for the future: “Our real goal is faithfulness to the Scriptures, faithfulness to our Lord and continuing the proclamation of the Gospel. In times of adversity, the true church rises up even stronger.”
The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) Office of International Mission (OIM) is working from a position of strength in leadership and vision for spreading the Gospel, planting Lutheran churches and showing mercy. We are confident that the Lord will accompany us, even during great trial and hardship, as we remain faithful to His Word and mission.

The LCMS currently has nearly 50 mature missionary pastors teaching, preaching or serving in key leadership positions, and another 60-plus experienced lay missionaries in auxiliary and support roles — all of whom are providing necessary insight into the nuances of work in vastly different settings. Each deployed staff member is directly and indirectly involved with sharing the Gospel, planting Lutheran congregations and showing mercy at the invitation of partner or emerging partner churches or small groups calling us to bring the pure Gospel into their midst.

By the grace of God, our missionaries are currently well-funded, thanks to the support they receive directly from individuals, congregations, districts, schools, the Lutheran Women’s Missionary League (LWML) and other granting agencies. They are also well cared for, with families that are well-adjusted and healthy in very challenging contexts. Even amid the COVID-19 outbreak, the Synod’s missionaries have continued to be joyful and steadfast in their callings.

LCMS International Center (IC) staff are united in making missionary care a priority; the same can be said of regional directors and key regional leadership positions, all bringing depth of insight with over 90 church bodies or missions in nearly 80 countries. There is strong loyalty to one another and the faithful work of the LCMS. By God’s grace, longevity of service will continue for the sake of wise and efficient stewardship.

The OIM will continue strategic interface with the seminaries to provide resources to partner and emerging partner churches and to develop new initiatives in missionary recruitment. The OIM greatly values the seminaries’ contribution to its theological education projects and will continue to use their expertise in developing curricula and projects to serve the international community.

The OIM’s missiology must continue to reflect a sound ecclesiology: “So that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted” (AC V). At home and on the foreign field, “The Church is the congregation of saints [Psalm 149:1] in which the Gospel is purely taught and the Sacraments are correctly administered” (AC VII). Therefore, a primary emphasis of the OIM’s missiology, fully supported and strongly requested by global church leadership, is establishing and strengthening faithful and thorough routes to ordination along with other auxiliary offices in the church. Faithful pastors lead to healthy congregations with decreasing U.S. dependence. Our hope and prayer is to strengthen the pastoral care of the church for the sake of reaching the lost to the ends of the earth.
Over the last 20 years, the OIM has experienced an increasing global footprint, in part due to activity outside of its direct initiative. To meet the demand, developments in pastoral formation are occurring in Riga, Latvia; Chiayi, Taiwan; Thailand; Santiago, Dominican Republic; Uganda; Ghana; Brazzaville, Republic of Congo; and more. Budget reductions will dramatically restrict the OIM’s ability to respond responsibly to global partner and emerging partner needs.

Nevertheless, in addition to our Lord’s promises, our missionaries are thankful for a donor base that is growing and very engaged. The LCMS loves its missionaries and has great joy in seeing their gifts in action over generations of faithful service. A bold mission budget and a strong and well-informed foreign mission team set a positive example in prioritizing mission, which will inspire and inform districts, congregations and individuals in reaching the lost at home, including immigrant communities in our own backyard.

Our Synod’s founders understood, as outlined in the Synod Constitution and Bylaws (3.8.3; 6.1; 6.2), that such complex, nuanced and multi-generational cross-cultural work should be carried out by the LCMS working collectively with the best available resources over generations.

LCMS international work, in a centralized office with historical knowledge and longevity of service, is not only in accordance with the Synod’s Constitution and convention resolutions with respect to missions, but also with respect to the chief ecumenical officer. While we understand the need for a responsible budget, our global endeavors should not be reduced to the point of negatively impacting the capacity of the LCMS president to carry out a global mission endeavor on behalf of the Synod.

Without a centralized OIM, the LCMS president cannot be the point of contact with global Lutheranism or nascent Lutheran movements. This is a time of global Lutheran opportunity, which should be engaged by the LCMS chief ecumenical officer (Bylaw 3.3.1.1.2), bishop to bishop or president to president, for the sake of efficiency and faithfulness. OIM administration must continue to be economical and efficient and provide for long-term church-body-to-church-body engagement in mission from one LCMS administration to another.

LCMS Ministry to the Armed Forces (MAF), which is under OIM, is self-funded and, with a staff of three, serves approximately 180 career and Reserve chaplains. The tremendous challenges of our MAF department in serving the U.S. Armed Forces is beyond comprehension. Continued support from the LCMS for our faithful and efficient MAF department must endure for the sake of those who serve on behalf of our nation at home and abroad.

Apart from MAF, OIM has nine staff at the IC and 1.5 deployed. This small staff recruits, sustains, cares for, directs and holds accountable over 110 missionary households, over 350 projects, and over 35 seminaries or Bible institutes in nearly 80 countries and more than 90 church bodies. With the vast improvement of global digital technology, missionaries face unprecedented requests for their time or attention, along with increasing governmental scrutiny from home and abroad. The care of these missionaries is more challenging than ever. Our small IC staff must be supported in its work as it serves more efficiently than ever before.

To maximize efficiencies with limited resources, the OIM will strive for greater collaboration and allocation of internal resources. The OIM, as a global enterprise, works not only under the LCMS president and chief mission officer but also in close collaboration with Human Resources, Legal, Accounting, Information Technology, Mission Advancement, Communications, the LCMS Offices of National Mission and Pastoral Education as well as the 35 LCMS districts, the two seminaries and the Concordia University System. Additional synchronization, communication and collaboration are necessary with Lutheran Hour Ministries, Concordia Publishing House and the LWML, as well as many Recognized Service Organizations and independent mission societies working internationally.
The LCMS has experienced and well-trained staff covering global safety and security concerns. Geopolitical instability, the rise of anti-Christian forces and internet vulnerabilities are increasing. Growing government and banking oversight mandates closer attention to detail before and during missionary deployment to maintain compliance with the laws of both the U.S. and host countries. The LCMS also has experienced, well-trained staff covering needs in missionary recruitment. Enhancement of capabilities and reasonable enhancement of staff in all these areas must be continually assessed and reconsidered so that our global footprint at a time of great need and opportunity is not compromised.

LCMS global mission endeavors are indispensable in being faithful to the Lord’s mission, the Synod’s foundation and the church’s very being. A responsibly bold mission vision reflects the Body of Christ’s very nature in bringing the Gospel to the lost in any and every context. The Synod’s founders understood this. Scripture is clear. Our history in cross-cultural and global mission and the sacrifices made by previous generations are undeniable. A church body must have a global mission vision.

A bold and robust global mission — within budget while properly caring for our missionaries — educates, emboldens and inspires the church at home. This is as necessary now as in any time in our Synod’s history. Forty percent of America is first- or second-generation immigrant and largely unchurched, not to mention the lost among those in the remaining 60 percent. Now is the time to challenge the church to continue in global mission rather than to recede, retreat or constrict. The LCMS loves its foreign missionaries. We need and respectfully request the support of all our congregations, church workers, agencies, auxiliaries and entities in bringing alignment with their called and sent LCMS missionaries.
For the LCMS Office of National Mission (ONM), the year started off with the implementation of *Making Disciples for Life* (*MDFL*), the new Synod emphasis established at the 2019 Synod convention.

The first *MDFL* conference was held Jan. 9–11, which brought LCMS members and church workers from across the country into conversations with LCMS leadership. Plans were in progress to continue the conferences across the country. At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, these conferences were canceled. In October, the *MDFL* conferences resumed under a hybrid model, which featured some in-person, and some online, gatherings.

A number of **multicultural grants** were also made available as a part of the *MDFL* initiative. Districts were invited to apply for grants of up to $10,000 for new multicultural outreach projects, and congregations were invited to apply for $1,000 grants for new multicultural outreach activities. In the first three months of the program, the ONM awarded four grants to districts and three to congregations. COVID-19 put a temporary halt to this program.

The *MDFL Internet Resource Center* (*makingdisciples.lcms.org*) has been under development and beta testing throughout the year, and resources are being continually added to the site. The Internet Resource Center provides one location for Lutherans (congregations, schools, church workers, youth groups, individuals, etc.) to access free resources available from the LCMS.

As the **COVID-19 pandemic** hit the country and the church, the ONM responded in a number of ways:

- Resources were created to help congregations, church workers and members respond to the difficulties of COVID-19. These included Bible studies, worship resources and ideas, and a resource on how congregations can deal with times of disaster.
- The Soldiers of the Cross—Amplified fund was established, which provided grants to help church workers who were in financial distress because of COVID and unable to qualify for unemployment.
- Communication with the districts, congregations and pastors of the Synod via phone call and Zoom was increased, to measure how things were going throughout the Synod, assess needs and help allay widespread feelings of isolation.
- A series of daily devotions with LCMS President Rev. Dr. Matthew C. Harrison, International Center Chaplain Rev. Sean Daenzer and other LCMS pastors was streamed during the initial weeks of COVID lockdowns. Once chapel resumed at the LCMS International Center, it was streamed daily on Facebook Live for LCMS members across the country to watch.
In April, Deaconess Tiffany Manor became the **new director of LCMS Life Ministry**. Manor was previously the assistant to the president of the LCMS New England District, and is an active life volunteer and member of the board of directors for Lutherans for Life. Manor is currently connecting with a network of life advocates across the Synod and the nation, developing education initiatives and organizing a virtual life conference.

**LCMS School Ministry** interacted with and provided resources for LCMS schools across the country as COVID-19 lockdowns changed the educational landscape drastically. LCMS schools saw significant increases in enrollment during 2020, because, on average, LCMS schools tend to be continuing face-to-face education more than public schools are.

**LCMS Disaster Response** responded to a number of disasters around the country this year, including a derecho windstorm in eastern Iowa; two hurricanes, which hit the LCMS Southern District and did significant damage; and fires in the West. It has continued to encourage and develop the training of Lutheran Early Response Teams (LERT) in districts across the country.

The ONM has partnered with DOXOLOGY in sponsoring a series of **“Take Heart” respite conferences** for pastors who have undergone stress during the COVID-19 pandemic. Two conferences have been held already and have offered pastors the opportunity to rest and to be refreshed in God’s Word and promises. Due to unexpected demand, DOXOLOGY and the ONM hope to offer more conferences in the coming months.
The Office of National Mission’s work touches much of the domestic mission of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS). The 22 program ministries create resources, provide endorsements and accreditation, and give aid and counsel to bring Christ’s saving Gospel to the world. The Synod’s conventions and the policies set by the Board for National Mission (BNM) set our objectives. We also respond to requests for help from LCMS districts and congregations.

The church’s core work has not changed since the days of the apostles. LCMS bylaws say that the ONM “is responsible for domestic ministries that especially serve congregations and schools through the districts of the Synod.” Our program ministries help God’s people proclaim that Gospel in changing circumstances and a challenging culture. As we plan, we try to prepare for both the long term and emerging resource needs of the LCMS.

**COVID resources and relief**

When COVID struck, the ONM produced some of the first resources for our Synod. The team took an interdisciplinary collaborative approach to get help out fast. We will continue that approach as the ONM provides financial assistance to church workers through the Soldiers of the Cross—Amplified fund. As of this writing, the fund has provided almost $1 million in grants to over 600 church workers in need.

In addition, the ONM will sponsor a series of “Take Heart” gatherings throughout the country in cooperation with DOXOLOGY, a Recognized Service Organization of the LCMS. Many pastors are feeling burned out and in need of support. So far, the Take Heart conferences have been an unequivocal success. One pastor said, “It was the spiritual rejuvenation that I didn’t know how much I needed.” Another said, “This may have saved my ministry.”

The ONM is also making plans for care events to help teachers, DCEs, deaconesses and other church workers.
Making Disciples for Life (MDFL) conferences and resources

Studies and focus groups indicated our Synod constituents’ strong desire to meet, talk and share resources with LCMS leaders. Likewise, this same research revealed that people craved an opportunity to learn from experts and each other. Out of that research, the MDFL conferences were born.

In January 2020, we held the first successful MDFL gathering in St. Louis. Unfortunately, due to travel restrictions and the effects of COVID, we canceled the next three conferences. However, the men and women of the ONM were not willing to let a good idea die. In October 2020, in cooperation with the Minnesota South District, we held a hybrid test conference that will be the model for future gatherings. Technology will enable participants to truly interact, learn and grow in a network of people who care deeply about our joint mission and to stay connected into the future.

Seeking to avoid video conference fatigue, MDFL planners knew this could not be just a Facebook Live event. They chose to use a new set of tools that allows in-person and online conference attendees to interact with live presenters and each other. In addition, suites of electronic tools help participants learn and interact for weeks after the conference’s final prayer.

The new MDFL Internet Resource Center is in its beta-testing phase. Initial technology troubles slowed the launch, but the years ahead promise a place in which LCMS stakeholders can easily access the LCMS’ best resources including live help from subject matter experts.

New opportunities for Life, Disaster Training, Schools

The Lord has provided opportunities through COVID. Life appears more precious when all life is threatened. People in mortal peril are more interested to hear about Him who is the resurrection and the life. Our pastors and congregational leaders seek to be responsive to urgent needs and be more efficient in delivering good news. The ONM’s program ministries can help.

Historically, the LCMS’ Life Ministry has concentrated on events like marches and conferences. The ONM’s new director of Life Ministry is transforming that for these times. While events are still important, the new director is focused on network building. These networks will prepare people to take local action while also supporting regional, national and even international efforts to save at-risk lives. This plan is closely tied to the ONM’s work to strengthen families and provide tools and training to build up spiritual, physical, mental and financial wellness.

Likewise, the LCMS’ Disaster Training ministry will use new technologies to train, maintain contact and deploy trained Lutheran Early Response Teams (LERT). Before COVID, the Disaster Training ministry team did not have the tools to do this work; it required a hefty investment for in-person training, manual volunteer tracking and follow-up. We are excited about the potential of these new tools for Disaster Training and the other ministries of the ONM.

LCMS School Ministry is beginning a new post-COVID era that allows our schools to get highly respected Lutheran School Accreditation almost entirely online. Forms, improvement plans, testing, curriculum and accreditation team visits will be possible through the internet. Schools will save time and money and reinvest the savings into providing educational excellence in a distinctively Lutheran environment.

Online learning and training platform

Across all 22 program ministries, the ONM will launch a new online learning platform that will more fully educate congregational leaders of the LCMS. In the past, the LCMS’ education programs relied heavily on trained trainers. These developing technologies have made self-directed study more inviting and rewarding.
Learning platforms will give participants greater flexibility to take courses, portions of classes or entire programs of study without the expense of outside experts. Future opportunities will include specialized pastoral ministry endorsements, general education programs and certifications for congregational officers.

**MDFL-tested resources**

The resources of *Making Disciples for Life* are, in many cases, an expansion of the tools available through the ONM’s Revitalization and Witness & Outreach program ministries. These resources are known for being theologically sound, easy to use, field-tested and peer-reviewed. Among the most exciting self-directed resources is the CADDS survey. This congregational survey was prepared by statisticians, church leaders and theologians. Congregations often do not address their most significant problems; instead, they address the issues they know how to fix. This survey helps identify the most critical issues. Then *MDFL* provides resources to help address those problems. Congregations will find resources to help strengthen evangelism, retain faithful stewardship, adjust group dynamics and much more. These 50 modules will address our mission’s most daunting problems.

**Multicultural outreach**

Multicultural outreach is a local matter. But the national Synod through the ONM can still help local congregations to meet their neighbors and bring the Gospel to all nations. In America today, the nations have come to us. Congregational leaders often do not know how to reach out. The ONM offers district and congregational grants to support multicultural outreach efforts. We are also planning to provide congregational leaders training in ways to meet new Americans, including a professionally designed English-as-a-Second-Language curriculum applicable to multiple language groups. Professional teachers will help train local leaders through remote learning platforms. Virtual parish education will help local leaders choose from various tools that will serve best within their context.

**Church-planting resources**

The ONM is in the midst of the largest church-planting research project in the history of our Synod. Only the Holy Spirit gives faith, and He works through the Means of Grace. We are discovering some interesting things about how He has chosen to work among us. For example, congregations that plant sister congregations grow 27% faster than those that do not. This is true regardless of whether the church plant succeeds. Unbelievers are most likely to join a church through a new church plant. However, large investments of outside money make church plants *more likely* to fail. The ONM has an entire program ministry dedicated to helping congregations plant other congregations. We look forward to sharing the results of this study with the entire LCMS.

These are just a sampling of the ONM’s plans and objectives in the coming years. We rejoice in the help of our LCMS family in sharing resources, carrying out our mission and *Making Disciples for Life*. 
AN INTERVIEW WITH

Rev. Dr. James A. Baneck
Executive Director, LCMS Office of Pastoral Education

BY CHERYL MAGNESS

The LCMS Office of Pastoral Education (PED) works under the leadership and direction of the Synod president though the supervision of the chief mission officer to further the development of the Synod’s pastors through a lifetime of formation and continuing education. In 2020, that work continued, even amid the unexpected challenges of a global pandemic.

“We certainly had to make adjustments along the way,” said the Rev. Dr. James A. Baneck, PED executive director. One such adjustment was holding an April 21 all-day church worker recruitment “summit” entirely online with over 35 participants. The church worker recruitment initiative, an outcome of 2019 Resolution 6-01, has been a major PED emphasis, with the past year’s focus on completing foundational research to help guide and implement the initiative.

“We have finalized [the initiative’s] strategies and key actions,” said Baneck, who added that the majority of intensive efforts to launch the initiative should be completed by the 2022 Synod convention. Baneck also noted that the initiative is geared toward recruiting both ordained and commissioned workers for the church.

“In 2018, we held an initial summit with Synod, seminary and Concordia University System leaders to study pastoral formation — where we are, and where we’re going,” Baneck said. “By the time we ended that meeting, it was not just pastoral formation, but church worker formation. … Because of that, we’re collaborating with the Office of National Mission, Office of International Mission, the seminaries, the Concordia University System. … It’s a huge, collaborative, churchwide effort.”

Another major PED focus is the PALS (Post-Seminary Applied Learning and Support) program, designed to help new pastors and their families transition from seminary to congregational life. Pastors who received their first calls in 2020 faced not only the typical challenges of such a transition, but the COVID-related challenges as well.

“These new pastors were facing something no one expected, and our PALS facilitators and districts did a great job supporting them. Facilitators were phoning, Zooming, texting, going above and beyond, taking extra care to ‘be pastor’ to these new pastors and their families,” Baneck said. The PALS wives, too, took extra steps to connect with the wives of pastors entering the ministry — for example, holding online gatherings when they couldn't get together in person.

Under PED leadership, two more Preach the Word (PTW) modules have been completed (view all eight modules at lcms.org/preach-the-word). PTW helps pastors work together to improve their preaching through video modules with accompanying resources. Also, in collaboration with LCMS Mission Advancement,
$220,204 was sent to each seminary in support of the Global Seminary Initiative. Through PED, over $3.6 million of Synod support was delivered to the seminaries combined.

In spite of the challenges of carrying out PED’s work during the COVID-19 era, Baneck said the five LCMS unit executives (National Mission, International Mission, Mission Advancement, Communications and Pastoral Education) have remained in close contact throughout the pandemic, having as many as three meetings per week. “We really do collaborate a lot. The work of each of our departments impacts all the others.

“COVID threw us all for a loop, but like everyone else, we are trying, with the grace of God, to figure out ways to move on and move forward.”
God promises, “I will give you shepherds (pastors) after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding” (Jer. 3:15).

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) understands the crucial nature of the holy ministry. Members of the LCMS believe God instituted the Office of the Holy Ministry: “So that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. Through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given. He works faith, when and where it pleases God, in those who hear the good news” (AC V 1–2).

The LCMS Office of Pastoral Education (PED) works under the leadership and direction of the Synod president though the supervision of the chief mission officer (Bylaw 3.4.3.8) to develop the Synod’s pastors through a lifetime of formation and continuing education.

The following are the priorities of the PED for the coming year:

The Church Worker Recruitment Initiative (CWRI)
2019 Resolution 6-01 was adopted by 94%. It resolved that all constituents of the LCMS be encouraged to commend, financially support and directly participate in this comprehensive, multiyear church worker recruitment initiative with (but not limited to) the following objectives:

- Identifying, catechizing, encouraging and supporting young boys and girls for church worker vocations;
- Instilling church worker vocations as sacred and joyful, a “calling from God,” vocations of integrity and fulfillment, grounded in Christ and baptismal salvation;
- Developing the “whole person” throughout this formation process; spiritually, in character, confessionally, physically, emotionally, synodically and intellectually; and
- Supporting, encouraging and caring for existing church workers for the welfare of those workers, for the proclamation and witness of the Gospel and for workers to be healthy advocates of the next generation of church workers.

The participants in this initiative include:

- Office of the President
- Chief mission officer
- Schwan Foundation
- Seminary presidents and leaders
- Concordia University presidents and leaders
- CUS president
Two main goals will drive our CWRI:

1. Increase interaction between youth and influencers on individual journeys toward professional church work vocations; and

2. Significantly increase the number of individuals enrolled in church worker formation/educational tracks at our Concordia University System institutions and LCMS seminaries so that the LCMS’ congregations and schools are adequately served in the coming decades.

The following strategies and key actions for this initiative include:

➢ Establish the Church Worker Recruitment Initiative as a long-term initiative by

1. Creating a brand identity and message platform as a foundation for communications, toolkits and resources;

2. Focusing messaging and identity by meeting youth and families where they are through research, focus groups and surveys; and

3. Being transparent about the urgency and depth of our challenge through regular updates on various Synod message platforms.

➢ Establish a three-stage emerging church worker/leader program by

1. Creating a three-stage development program to expose, identify and form young people on the path to church work at Baptism–6th grade (ages 0–12); 7th–8th grade (ages 12–14); and 9th–12th grade (ages 14–18);

2. Developing resources for influencers (parents, grandparents, pastors, teachers, youth workers, etc.) to identify potential young church workers; and

3. Distributing resources for family and children that speak to the three stages.

➢ Equip critical influencers to identify and encourage young leaders by

1. Training district presidents and circuit visitors about the initiative so they can assist and remind congregations;

2. Developing resources for pastors and commissioned workers to identify high potential youth and choose helpers in the church with this activity; and

3. Equipping key influencers with resources to identify, engage and nominate young people for a church leader development program.
Develop a continuous insight loop to develop new insights and tactics by
1. Building a database of influencers to keep them informed and engaged;
2. Encouraging families and key influencers to identify the church worker journey and remove barriers; and
3. Developing an agile, cross-functional group to give insights to optimize the program through their expertise, experience and wisdom.

Position church workers as admirable champions of humility and service by
1. Developing an ongoing library of church workers’ stories, pictures and videos that can be used in multiple formats;
2. Promoting Church Workers’ Month as a key celebration and recognition of church workers, their vocation and influence and impact on the church; and
3. Developing curriculum that embeds champion stories of church work and catechizes the church in church work vocation year-round.

PALS
Post-Seminary Applied Learning and Support (PALS) was developed by a joint effort of the Council of Presidents and the Synod’s Commission on Ministerial Growth and Support in 1998. PALS helps the pastor, his wife and children transition from seminary life through the first three years of his call. Pastors receive a maximum of six continuing education units per year by participating in a PALS gathering each year. A PALS gathering includes worship, study topic, casuistry and fellowship among the families. An experienced pastor and his wife facilitate each PALS group and serve as valuable mentors.

Currently, there are 28 PALS groups in the Synod involving 128 pastors and 88 wives. Due to COVID-19, all of the PALS groups met virtually but plan to resume in-person gatherings for the coming year. In past years, PALS topics included: getting to know your congregation, conflict management, multi-staff congregations, setting boundaries in work and home, preaching and pastoral administration/leadership. This year, PALS topics have focused on pandemic issues: worship online, Holy Communion practices, pastoral care while social distancing, funerals during a pandemic and more.

In PALS, caring for the pastor’s wife is as much a priority as caring for the pastor. This year, PALS worked with Kate Meadows whose husband recently graduated from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. Kate’s book, Faith to Follow: The Journey of Becoming a Pastor’s Wife, follows the journey of seminarian wives through their first year at their husband’s first call. Kate is preparing a video discussion guide for PALS wives to accompany her book. This resource is scheduled for completion this winter.

PALS is also developing a resource, Synod 101. It is a comprehensive resource that will help PALS pastors and wives become more acquainted with the LCMS and its history, governance, resources and culture. This resource will include over 40 three-minute video segments accompanied with a one-page discussion sheet. This resource will be released in segments and will be made available without cost on the LCMS website.

This year, PALS also teamed up with DOXOLOGY for PALS pastors in their fourth and fifth years of ministry. Through a generous grant from the Schwan Foundation, half the tuition for the classic DOXOLOGY experience is being made available to these pastors. The classic DOXOLOGY program involves three separate events: the pastor alone, the pastor accompanied by a layperson from his congregation and the pastor with his wife.
**Preach the Word**

The PED also oversees the *Preach the Word* project. PALS and *Preach the Word* are some of the most successful continuing-education programs in the recent history of the LCMS. *Preach the Word*, commissioned by President Harrison and currently funded through the Schwan Foundation, helps pastors enhance their preaching through video modules and discussion guides. There are currently nine modules completed. Three additional *PTW* modules are under development:

1. **“Catechetical Preaching”** by Peter Bender
2. **“Sermon Structure”** by Carl Fickenscher
3. **“Missions”** by Douglas Rutt

Over 3,900 individuals have watched full video segments. All modules are free to everyone on the LCMS website.

**Support to the seminaries**

In collaboration with LCMS Mission Advancement, the Office of Pastoral Education plays a role in advocating and reporting how the corporate Synod supports the seminaries. Synod support for our seminaries in FY20 totaled nearly $3.6 million. Worship offerings account for $594,000. Almost $2 million came from the Joint Seminary Fund. Seminary-specific donations added up to $173,000. The Global Seminary Initiative provided $300,000. Earnings from Forward in Remembrance was $136,000. Combined grants and Faculty Services was $414,000. If you would like to help support pastoral formation, please go to [lcms.org/make-a-gift/pastoral-formation-and-care#](https://lcms.org/make-a-gift/pastoral-formation-and-care#). There are several options from which to choose.
In spite of a difficult and uncertain year due to the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting economic challenges, the LCMS improved its bottom line (net assets without donor restrictions) in FY20 by $1.8 million, mainly due to receiving an accelerated and final payment from the sale of KFUO FM.

While this improvement was slightly less than that anticipated in the budget, a number of careful financial decisions in advance of and during the pandemic helped the LCMS to stay in a secure financial position.

As the pandemic began to cause lockdowns and financial uncertainty, the Operations Team provided guidance to the various LCMS departments, which immediately took precautionary action to cut operating expenses at the LCMS International Center.

Hiring was suspended in the last quarter of FY20 (April 1–June 30); any vacant position remained vacant. In addition to this, the Synod eliminated all travel including for board meetings and conferences.

The Synod also received some funds through the Payroll Protection Program that helped meet payroll needs for a short period of time.

The financial implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for Synod were immediate; in fact, the majority of the most serious effects happened in the first couple of months of the pandemic, as congregations and members adjusted to reduced church attendance and many other changes. Across the Synod, congregations saw an initial drop in giving over the last quarter of FY20, though these numbers seem to have “bounced back” since then.

The LCMS intake of unrestricted funds from the districts (those funds which originate from congregational offerings and support costs such as salary and benefits for Synod employees) was reduced slightly as a result of this initial decline in offerings. Based on the decrease in offerings at the start of COVID-19, the LCMS’ districts projected that these unrestricted funds would be down by 5–7% in fiscal year 2021, and Synod Accounting budgeted in light of this.

Due to financial uncertainty, rather than passing a complete budget for FY21 at its May meeting, the Board of Directors (BOD) passed a provisional budget that applied to just the first quarter of FY21 and carried on significantly lower expenditures.

In addition to travel restrictions and the hiring freeze, these budget limitations also resulted in a small Reduction in Force (RIF) at the LCMS International Center.

On Sept. 22, the BOD passed a budget for the remainder of FY21, at $59.6 million for the year. This conservative budget was more than 16% lower than the FY20 budget.

All in all, in spite of a financially challenging and uncertain year, the Synod survived with finances intact through careful actions taken in advance of and amid the COVID-19 pandemic.
Board of directors, chief administrative officer, chief financial officer, risk management, audit, accounting, information technology, human resources, operational services.

IMPORTANT NOTES:

a. The Better Business Bureau, GuideStar and Charity Navigator endorse a standard that indirect services costs should not exceed 33–35% of a nonprofit’s total expenditures, with program expenditures being not less than 65–67% of the total.

**Total** $67,254

*Board of directors, chief administrative officer, chief financial officer, risk management, audit, accounting, information technology, human resources, operational services.

**Indirect Services**

(see note a)

$14,279

**Common Services**

(see note a)

$8,116

**Advancement**

$6,163

**Direct Services**

(see note a)

$52,975

**Missions**

69%

**Pastoral education**

8%

**University education**

1%

**Communications**

5%

**KFUO**

2%

**Ecclesiastical Services**

15%

**Total** $67,254

*Board of directors, chief administrative officer, chief financial officer, risk management, audit, accounting, information technology, human resources, operational services.

IMPORTANT NOTES:

a. The Better Business Bureau, GuideStar and Charity Navigator endorse a standard that indirect services costs should not exceed 33–35% of a nonprofit’s total expenditures, with program expenditures being not less than 65–67% of the total.
## Fiscal Year 2020

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<th>Expenditures</th>
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### Release of Unrestricted Net Assets

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“Charitable giving is an outwardly visible sign of the joy and passion people have for telling others about our Savior’s love,” said Mark D. Hofman, executive director of LCMS Mission Advancement. “Fiscal Year 2020, as fraught with challenges and puzzles as it was, still revealed that joy.”

As in other areas of the Synod, the 2020 coronavirus pandemic impeded — and continues to impede — Mission Advancement’s ability to perform its work. In March, as shutdowns were instituted and travel was suspended, Mission Advancement staff turned to other methods and tools to communicate with contributors. With the total closure of the LCMS International Center, employees in the St. Louis area transitioned to working from home, while deployed team members in other cities stayed home as well. As restrictions across the country vary according to geographical location, Mission Advancement staff continues to adjust. “The costs associated with encouraging, receiving and reporting philanthropic support remain well within generally accepted limits,” Hofman said.

From a financial standpoint, Hofman reported that, while resources made available through wills and bequests fell far short of the rolling five-year average for the LCMS, living contributors and organizations “rallied.”

“Mission Advancement was blessed to be at the nexus of tens of thousands of LCMS contributors driving to spread the Gospel in the United States and around the world,” Hofman said. He added that an abundance of generosity for disaster work in prior years removed the pressure to solicit donations for disasters this year, allowing other ministries of the LCMS to benefit from similar generosity.

“Donations people gave in previous years, especially to support disaster work wherever the need or opportunity is greatest, really shored our ability to respond to the events that happened in 2020,” Hofman said. “We did not see a demonstrated need to send out a churchwide appeal asking for more, and wise stewardship of already available resources really stretched their impact.”

“Giving to disasters in 2020 was down,” Hofman continued, “but that is more a reflection of a reduced need to call for additional help because of how generous people were in 2018 and 2019. It allowed us to focus our 2020 efforts and contributor joy on bolstering support for missionaries and their work, seminary support, unrestricted funding and other areas experiencing financial pressure.”

Hofman emphasized that, pandemic or not, there are always opportunities to personally support the work God has given His Church to do, using the very resources He places in our care.

“Mission Advancement serves Christ and His church by connecting disciples with opportunities to personally contribute to the Lord’s mission,” Hofman said. “Mission Advancement’s challenge is always the same: accomplishing its work in a manner consistent with God’s Word and the Lutheran Confessions so that God alone is glorified.”
Looking Forward …

Mission Advancement connects God’s people with a long menu of opportunities for each household, congregation and group to share the Gospel through voluntary charitable giving. Mission Advancement performs that role in complete accord with God’s Word and the Lutheran Confessions. The pandemic certainly calls into question the wisdom of humans making plans during a period of unquestionable turmoil. We do not possess a playbook for navigating the upheaval our world is experiencing. Keeping that in mind, we must still choose a path forward lest we wander down any random road into the future. Some of those roads may lead to an undesired if not disastrous outcome.

In the coming year, Mission Advancement will continue to serve those who — moved by the Holy Spirit — freely choose to give of themselves to the mission and work of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Mission Advancement will serve those open to making their first contribution at the national and international level.

We will build both a team and a model of advancement designed to serve each contributor with excellence and respect from end to end. From the person contemplating a first gift to the person giving what may be their final offering to the Lord through a designed estate plan or testamentary will, Mission Advancement will be both a resource and a trusted partner along the way.

We will diligently refine and sharpen the LCMS’ case for financial support from God’s people. We must answer some lingering questions that seem to stymie a joyful response from the broadest possible number of people. We will make the cases for international and national mission, mercy work, pastoral formation and care, ecclesiastical services and all the areas of ministry the LCMS provides.

We will strive toward greater collaboration and coordination with other Synod agencies, auxiliaries, organizations and the 35 districts of the LCMS. Competition for people’s money is the source of much frustration in the homes of God’s people, and we, at the national level, must work together better as one body witnessing to our Savior’s work.

We will leverage the blessings of modern technology to establish personal connections and meet the needs of any contributor for high-quality care and service. This will save our allocated travel dollars and free our contributors’ time for other areas of their life and vocation. And we will use the experience and gifts of our staff, who gain greater understanding and appreciation for every contributor with each passing day.

We will seek to deliver a joyful experience for our contributors as they join with other congregations in the LCMS. Donors will experience greater levels of joy, connectedness, meaning, trust and satisfaction for having voluntarily contributed to the Gospel witness of our Synod. Through their contributions, they will make a difference in the name of the One whose love saved them.
The church will see that response in the various reports we produce, not the least of which is the upcoming FY2020 Annual Report. It will compare 2020 giving to giving in 2019. This and other reports can be accessed on our transparency resources page (lcms.org/giving/transparency), and we stand ready to answer any questions those reports do not address.

We will accept the risks that we face. A bold invitation to donate even during turmoil may not produce the desired outcomes, but it may provide an opportunity to learn valuable lessons that are not possible when the world is more stable. We may “fail,” but we will have failed by being bold rather than failing through paralyzing fear and inaction. We are secure in Christ’s promises even when a person declines an invitation to contribute. And so we will be bold in extending the invitation to contribute under Christ’s immutable promises.

God will provide what is truly needed. He will do that through His baptized children who are gifts from a divine and merciful Father. Mission Advancement will keep its priorities straight by: 1) striving to serve Christ faithfully; 2) caring for His baptized; and 3) accurately recording, with Christian integrity, each donation His disciples choose to provide so the giver’s intention is fulfilled. We trust that He will never leave us or forsake us, even during a global pandemic and a strife-ridden, conflicted, self-centered world. Man plans, and God laughs. He laughs because He already knows the future. He has established His plan and His kingdom, of which we are heirs.