



Youth Workshops

2026 WELS Youth Rally
Bowling Green State University
Bowling Green, Ohio

July 14-17

Y1 - Seasons of Waiting: What is ahead of me? What will I be?

In this session, we will talk about navigating the often challenging and uncertain “seasons of waiting” in life. Our conversation will provide encouragement, insight, and practical tools to help you understand and embrace these periods, fostering growth and resilience as you look toward your future in Christ.

We will focus on the concept that waiting—whether for opportunities, change, answers, or personal growth—is a natural and important part of life. By exploring real-life stories, interactive activities, and thoughtful discussion, you will learn that the season of waiting is not wasted time, but a chance for personal and spiritual growth.

Mark Schroeder has served as a pastor in Michigan, North Carolina, Wisconsin, and Arizona for nearly 20 years. He has been serving mission congregations and teaching high school students. Mark has a passion for sharing Jesus with anyone and everyone who will listen, and he absolutely loves to encourage others in finding ways they can jump into ministry. Mark and his wife, Alissa, live in San Tan Valley, Ariz., with their three teenage kids. The Schroeders love hiking, going to the gym, and traveling.

Y2 - NAP TIME: Rest in Jesus and Take a Nap

Elite military forces nap, and they must learn how to do it. You might know why. The world, especially for students, is “Go! Go! Go!” And when we get a chance to stop, we often choose scrolling and distraction instead of real rest for body and soul.

In this workshop, we will look at a little bit of science and a few Bible passages, and we will help ourselves find rest in Jesus. We will also take a nap. Not just any nap, an elite-military-forces-style nap. Students may have some nap tips, too. We will share ideas and discuss challenges to finding real rest. With the Holy Spirit’s help, we will walk out of more rested, more ourselves, more prepared to find rest in Jesus, and more energetic to love our neighbors.

Whether you are a nap enthusiast or a skeptic, this session is for everyone who wants to learn how to embrace rest in a way that honors both your body and your Creator.



Come ready to reflect, relax, and nap!

Nate Wordell is a happy son of the King of the universe, a holy hot mess, and loved by God for Jesus' sake, and God put him here now with these people to glorify Him by enjoying them. He adores his wife Rachel, does his best to raise two sons, and gets to be the pastor for the people at Wisconsin Lutheran College, Milwaukee, Wis. He previously did that in Appleton, Wis., and at Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn. Sometimes Nate gets tired—God gave him a soul that runs out of energy and a body that is wasting away. That is true of you too. So sometimes Nate naps, and you can too.

Y3 - It's OK to Feel: Big Emotions. Better Conversations. Healthier Minds.

Feelings are real, and talking about them matters. But do you ever feel like emotions create drama—whether in your mind or in your relationships—and your mental health takes a hit because of it? God gave us emotions, not so that they can control us, define us, or tear us apart. But healthy emotional expression and good listening can draw us closer to each other and to the God who created us. In this workshop, we will learn practical ways to express emotions honestly and listen well, so conversations build understanding, trust, and hope. When we communicate in healthy ways, we reflect Jesus' love and find strength in His truth.

Greg Lyon has served as campus pastor at Wisconsin Lutheran College, Milwaukee, Wis., since 2015, walking alongside students in their spiritual and personal growth. In June 2024, he began serving as a licensed mental health counselor with Christian Family Solutions, primarily supporting college students through counseling that integrates faith and emotional wellness. Greg also chairs the WELS Committee on Identity, Gender, and Sexuality, guiding biblical, compassionate conversations on complex cultural issues. He speaks regularly on topics related to mental health and LGBTQ+ concerns. His passion is working with people through complex challenges with a relational approach rooted in biblical truth.

Y4 - A Day in the Life of a Home Missionary

How, exactly, do you start a church? In this session, we will tell stories of the wins, losses, embarrassing moments, and victories during our first two years out in the wild of the big city. And simple—in fact, FUN—steps you can take to turn your congregation into a mission congregation, too.

Jacob & Grace Ungemach are planting a church in the heart of Cincinnati, Ohio. Jacob and Grace offer unique insights into how to plant a church using only a few dedicated folks, buckets of local coffee, and a lot of Skyline Chili.

Jacob graduated from Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn., and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis., and was assigned in May of 2024. Grace owns a digital marketing agency that



serves Lutheran churches and nonprofits with branding, web design, and consulting. Meeting halfway between their home states of Wisconsin and South Carolina, they use their unique gifts to find opportunities to share Jesus with friends and neighbors. Over the last two years, their singular focus has been bringing Jesus to Oakley, an urban neighborhood in Cincinnati, and they are going to tell exactly how they did it.

Y5 - Who are you when nobody's watching?

It is one thing to act like a Christian when people are watching and when it will make you look good; it is a whole different challenge to live as a Christian when no one sees. This creative look at the book of Ruth will help us examine the challenge of the secret life of the Christian. We will see how God shapes who we are when nobody's watching, and how that will affect the people around us when everyone's watching.

Julius Buelow, born in Port Huron, Mich., was also reborn through baptism as an infant on August 26, 1990. He and his wife, Nicole, have four kids. Julius has learned to love churches big and small throughout his life and ministry. Whether at a 2000+ member church in Wisconsin or a 10-member church in Sweden, God is always there with his powerful word.

Julius likes reading, writing, music (especially saxophone), board games, food (especially mac and cheese), exercising (so he can eat more food), traveling, laughing, spending time with friends, playing (as frequently demanded by his kids), and all sorts of blessings God has given him. Most of all, Julius loves learning more about God and sharing what he's learned. Julius looks forward to sharing God's Word with you!

Y6 - Truth and Lies

God's truth is powerful. So are lies. Every day we face lies—lies we tell ourselves, lies our culture tells us, and lies Satan uses to distract us from a fulfilling life with God. We will explore some lies we tend to believe and how to combat them with truth. We will also briefly explore how our culture views the concept of truth and how we can lovingly call out the lies of this world and live in the truth of God—especially the gospel.

Phil Bischoff is a staff minister at CrossWalk Church in Phoenix, Ariz. He has 20 years of ministry experience. After three years of teaching at Wisconsin Lutheran High School, Milwaukee, Wis., Phil spent the past 17 years as youth minister and outreach director at CrossWalk. He is married and has three children. Outside of ministry, Phil enjoys coaching fitness classes, hiking, backpacking, watching sports, and dining out.



Y7 - Our Need for a Greater Story

For as long as you can remember, you have been listening to stories—stories about good and evil, love and justice, life and death, and truth and belonging. Whether it is the stories you scroll through on TikTok or the narratives we hear in the news, we use stories as a way of bridging the gap between facts and values. We use stories as a way of making sense of our lives, and answer complicated questions like, Who am I? Where am I going? Why does my life matter?

Our fractured world cannot escape our need for a unifying story that is true for everyone. We need a singular story that is both externally corroborated and internally consistent. We are starving for a story that does not rest upon our restless hearts—but a story within which our restless hearts find rest. We want more than a story that feels good; we want a story that is good.

In this breakout, we will examine several popular stories (i.e., critical theory, expressive individualism, atheism, relativism, et al.) and see why those stories ultimately fall short. We will also highlight how Christ-followers can demonstrate why the greater story of the gospel is—and always will be—so good.

Sam Jeske serves as a Lutheran pastor in Crown Point, Ind., the place he, his wife, Tracie, and their son, Elijah, have been happy to call home since 2019. Sam likes meeting new people, traveling, bookbinding, reading, going to concerts, studying Chinese, and watching movies. He's also an enthusiast for board games like Zombicide, Call to Adventure, and The Thing. He is a multi-instrumentalist who loves music and uses it to enrich worship. Sam currently serves as the content moderator for The Institute for Lutheran Apologetics. He also co-hosts a podcast called Graveyard Shift Gospel.

Y8 – Becoming Men After God’s Own Heart, for young men

King David was described as a man after God’s own heart. One can imagine for us as Christian men, it would be our dream to be referred to as that! This workshop will help young men cut through the disastrous perspective the sinful world has on masculinity and will let Scripture shape our understanding of what it means to be a real man.

In this session, we will discuss the following key topics:

- The World’s Definition: Identifying and dismantling the lies of Satan and the world regarding masculinity.
- Identity in Christ: First embracing your most important identity—the one you have in Jesus.
- Identity as a Male: Embracing the fact God made you a man and what that means (and does not mean) for your life now and in the future.
- Biblical Anecdote: Why Saul failed and David did not.
- Practical Things: Exploring actual ways to live as Christ-like men.



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Paul Koester has served as one of the pastors at Bethlehem, Menomonee Falls and Germantown, Wis., for the past five years. Before that, he served as a campus pastor (more affectionately known as a “tutor”) at Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn., where he especially ministered to the 120 men of Summit Hall.

As a young pastor of a larger congregation, he’s had the opportunity to see wonderful examples of godly men being godly men, and in turn, he’s had opportunities to encourage the many young men of the congregation in their walk with God. Paul and his wife, Erica, have three children and enjoy spending time with both their immediate family and their church family.

Y9 – Strong Without Apology, for young women

In this workshop, we will discuss femininity led by faith, rooted in grace, and grounded in kindness.

Megan Herkstroeter is an orthopedic and sports medicine nurse practitioner and former registered nurse navigating a demanding, high-expectation field where confidence, resilience, and clarity of identity matter. Through her own journey, she has learned how easy it is to feel pressure to rush life, conform to society’s timelines for women, and measure worth through achievement and external validation rather than identity in Christ.

Balancing ambition, independence, and trust in God has deeply shaped both who Megan is and the message she shares. “Strong Without Apology” was born from that place. Megan’s heart is to encourage young women to trust God’s timing, choose relationships that strengthen them, and build their identity in Christ. She wants every young woman to know she doesn’t have to reshape herself to fit in or shrink her strength to belong—she can lead with confidence, live with kindness, and remain deeply rooted in faith.

Y10 – Starting a Spiritual Conversation

It’s easy to talk about the weather, sports, etc. But Jesus? In this workshop, we will prepare ourselves for approaching people and broaching the subject of Jesus. We will discuss ideas to start a conversation with an unchurched person and turn it into a conversation about Jesus. Drinking in God’s promises will give us the confidence to start spiritual conversations and keep them going.

David Scharf served as a parish pastor at Immanuel in Greenville, Wis., and as coordinator for the Northern Wisconsin District Evangelism Commission from 2005–2016. He now serves as a professor of theology at Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minn., and adjunct professor at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis. He is a member of the Institute for Worship and Outreach and chairman of the Commission on Congregational Counseling. He has delivered presentations at district pastor and teacher conferences; Men of His Word/Truth



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conferences; the WELS National Conference on Lutheran Leadership; Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary's annual symposium; and the WELS National Conference on Worship, Music, and the Arts. Dave is a graduate of Luther Preparatory School, Watertown, Wis. (1996); Martin Luther College (2000); and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (2005). He and his wife, Beth, have six children aged 12-23. Dave enjoys golfing, reading, using his Traeger smoker, and riding his moped.

Y11 – Three Kinds of Relationships, Three Kinds of Love

Your best friend knows everything about you. Your parents seem like they're from another planet. And strangers? Well... they're just there. But what if Christ could shine through you in all those relationships—not just the easy ones? This session explores how being Christ's ambassador affects how you treat your inner circle, your family, and even people you barely know. Learn how to bring love, respect, and truth into every connection—whether you're hanging out, disagreeing with your parents, or just checking out at Target.

Dr. Karen Fischer is a counselor and educator whose passion surrounds marrying the grace and truth of the gospel with understanding psychological stewardship. Her belief is that we can all improve the use of our minds to improve our ability to love God and others.

Dr. Fischer serves as professor and program director of the Master of Science in Professional Counseling at Wisconsin Lutheran College, Milwaukee, Wis. She brings an array of counseling, management, instruction, advising, and professional experience to the role. Previous positions included outpatient and inpatient psychiatric hospital settings and community clinic counseling. She has also served in advisory, development, and training roles and enjoys community psycho-education opportunities. Dr. Fischer holds a PhD in counselor education and supervision from Concordia University Irvine, Calif. Her research interests include resilience in a Christian context, compassion satisfaction, and flourishing.

Y12 – Tasting the Fruits of World Missions

You are going to learn about the side of missions that you usually don't hear about. You will see the fruits of missions that go beyond donating money or supplies to people in need. There is a big difference between giving to something and actually being present, seeing the faces of people who need Jesus. Being the boots on the ground, witnessing the impact Jesus has on another culture, and experiencing the world from a new perspective—these fuel your desire to live a missionary life. Even if your time in a foreign country doesn't completely change the world, it can change you.

From their time growing up in mission fields, Ben and Elise gained a whole new mindset about sharing Jesus. They have been inspired by people who see the world very differently than they do, yet love the same Jesus.



In this session, we will taste the fruits of missions, not just for the good of those overseas, but also for the good of us as Christ's ambassadors.

Normally people introduce themselves by sharing where they're from, but Elise Ulman has been moving around the globe since she was born because she and her family were international missionaries, so Elise can't claim a hometown. She has lived in Malawi, Portugal, Wisconsin, and the Dominican Republic, and right now lives in Appleton. Since she didn't have a hometown, Elise had to find her identity elsewhere. And she knows the safest and coolest place to be is in God's hands. Elise loves to work out, read, draw, and watch movies with her husband. She's excited to meet you and talk about mission work!

Y13 – The Backstage Pass: Gear, Grooves, and the Power of Music

Step onto the arena stage for an all-access look at the mechanics and ministry of Koiné. This session bridges the gap between technical execution and spiritual purpose, offering a rare "backstage" perspective on life as a touring band. What we will explore:

- **The Gear:** An up-close look at our stage setup, the equipment we use, and the "why" behind our sound.
- **The Craft:** A breakdown of Koiné's songwriting process and how we approach modern hymn arrangements.
- **The Mission:** A candid discussion on the profound power of music as a vital tool for worship and its role in the daily life of a Christian.
- Whether you are a musician looking for technical insights or a fan curious about the creative process, join us on stage to see how the music comes together.

Koiné: Common Language, Common People, Extraordinary Message

Koiné strives to find a unique balance between the familiarity of classic hymn melodies and the raw instrumentation of new arrangements.

Interesting Koiné Facts:

- *Established in 2003, Koiné began as a worship band for one church in downtown Milwaukee, Wis.*
- *Koiné has released 10 full-length albums, selling over 100,000 hard copies, and surpassing 5 million digital streams of their songs.*
- *Koiné's mission has evolved into creating quality digital worship resources that may be used all over the world. Resources include sheet music, guitar charts, worship backgrounds, accompaniment tracks, lyric videos, videos with musical notation built in, and more! Check out koineworshipmedia.com for details.*

To find out more or to join their support team, visit koinemusic.com.

Leader Workshops

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L1 – Why Youth Leaders Matter More Than Ever

The rally ends. The buses go home. Now what?

If you serve youth in any capacity—pastor, teacher, volunteer, or chaperone—this workshop is for you. Join Donn Dobberstein, director of WELS Discipleship, for a practical and encouraging session focused on equipping you to keep momentum alive long after the rally. Discover online tools, events, and resources designed to support your ministry. Share the challenges you are seeing. Ask your questions. Help shape how WELS can better serve you. The future engagement of our teens does not happen by accident. Christ works through leaders like you. Let's talk about how.

Donn Dobberstein has spent three decades serving in mission settings, from Kansas to Florida, and now serves as director of WELS Discipleship. What fuels his ministry is a deep desire to help churches navigate both cultural and congregational challenges, so their members become active, engaged disciples. His work spans the full spectrum of discipleship—from youth ministry (youth rally, teen resources) and adult spiritual growth (congregational resources) to marriage enrichment, women's ministry, and family faith formation. He and his wife, Beth, are blessed with four adult children and their growing families.

L2 – Wonderfully Made, Fully Known: Where LGBTQ+ Matters Meet Jesus

The national debate continues to rage around LGBTQ+ issues, and the discourse commonly treats the individuals in question as exactly that: issues to be solved. But these are real people being discussed, with real stories and real pain resulting from real conflicts with their communities and families. Jesus really cares about these folks, and he speaks to them with profound relief and hope. Join in to hear a same-sex attracted Christian reflect on what the gospel means to the LGBTQ+ community, and how the church can better approach these conversations with Christlike love and integrity.

Ben Dose is the director of Reclamation, a gospel-centered community discussion and support group for WELS and ELS folks working through the impact of LGBTQ+ experience in their own lives or in the lives of their loved ones. Ben also sits on the WELS Committee on Identity, Gender, and Sexuality, where he utilizes years of insights from walking alongside fellow believers at Reclamation, and even more years of personal experience from growing up in WELS while coming to grips with his own same-sex attraction. His work with the committee has focused on building its new website project, www.madeknown.net. Ben lives in Seattle, Wash., where he builds all sorts of other digital and physical things in between hikes.



L3 – Passing the Baton: We run this relay race together!

Any track coach will tell you that a clean exchange of the baton in relay races is vitally important. As youth leaders, you are helping and serving the young adults during the teenage leg of their spiritual race towards heaven. You also are preparing them for the next leg of that race. There will be an exchange from life as a high schooler to that of a college-aged young adult. You play an important role in that transition. The “Christ through us” focus in this workshop emphasizes how you can serve and prepare the teenagers under your care as they get ready for what comes after high school.

In this workshop we will discuss strategies to prepare, equip, and empower these young men and women to stay faithful to their Savior during their college years. The discussion will include information about how you have fellow teammates running with you as partners in the gospel.

Daniel M Lindner serves as our WELS Campus Ministry mission counselor under the WELS Campus Ministry Committee and Board for Home Missions. He is currently working with over 50 locations (both established and mission congregations) that serve the college campus demographic.

L4 – Illustrations that Impact

Are your teen bible studies basically the same? Do your teens lack engagement and involvement? In this session, you will learn an intentional shift in preparing your studies that connects with teens. The presentation will be packed with practical, visual illustrations that challenge the mind of the listener and highlight key portions of Scripture. Give God something new to bless your youth ministry!

Jon Enter grew up in rural Minnesota wanting to be a doctor, until the Lord, during a youth rally in Colorado, turned his path toward using God’s grace to heal people. After he became a pastor in 2004, Jon focused on youth ministries to grow his mission church in West Palm Beach, Fla., where he served for 14 years. Fueled by his passion for encouraging youth to actively serve in church, Jon wrote “Transformed,” a seminar to equip youth leaders. In 2018, youth ministry became his full-time focus in his current role as a campus pastor at St. Croix Lutheran Academy, West St. Paul, Minn. He teaches senior religion, coaches football, counsels teens, and runs the mission trips program. Jon and his wife, Debbi, actively enjoy life with their four daughters: Violet, Lydia, Eden, and Maggie.



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L5 – Encouraging the Encouragers

Who has encouraged you in your faith? For many, a parent, teacher, or mentor played a key role in recognizing gifts and pointing them toward opportunities to serve. This session will explore how you can be that encourager for the next generation, supporting young people as they consider ways God may use their gifts in ministry and service.

Mary Heckendorf grew up in Arizona and attended Luther Preparatory School in Watertown, Wis., and Martin Luther College in New Ulm, Minn. Encouraged by her parents from a young age, she knew she wanted to be a teacher. She spent 25 years serving this way before accepting a call as a ministry recruitment counselor. She is passionate about encouraging others to consider lives of service and sharing the hope of the gospel.

Mary and her husband, Joel, have been married for 27 years and are blessed with three children who are studying for or serving in public ministry. This gives her a special perspective as she connects with young people and families. She lives in Reno, Nev., and enjoys spending time with family and friends, hiking, playing games, and reading. A passage that continues to encourage her is, "Be strong and courageous...for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go" (Joshua 1:9).

L6 – The Backstage Pass: Gear, Grooves, and the Power of Music

See Y13 for full description of this session.



Keynotes

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Wednesday – Christ through Ordinary You

In this keynote, we will share how God works through ordinary people in everyday life. Serving with Academia Cristo in Ecuador, Luke and Rachel have seen believers throughout Latin America share Christ's love right where God has placed them—at home, at work, and in their communities. Connected to the rally theme, "Christ Through Us," this session will explore how following Jesus isn't just something that happens at church or on mission trips and sharing Christ isn't limited to pastors or missionaries far away. God uniquely places each believer in families, friendships, schools, and communities where they are perfectly positioned to share his love. Through stories from the mission field and their own experiences as missionaries and parents, Luke and Rachel will encourage you to see how God has uniquely positioned you to share his love and how Christ is already working through you in your everyday life.

Luke Beilke serves as Dean of Students for Academia Cristo, an online academy that teaches God's Word to adult students throughout Latin America. Luke teaches Bible classes online, mentors emerging leaders, and encourages students as they begin Bible study groups and churches in their own communities. A central part of his work is building relationships with students and walking alongside them as they grow in faith and leadership.

Luke and his wife Rachel have served together as missionaries in Latin America since 2022 and currently live in Quito, Ecuador. Rachel serves the ministry of Academia Cristo as the volunteer coordinator, working closely with WELS high schools as they plan ministry trips throughout Latin America. Together, Luke and Rachel also share Christ daily in their God-given vocation as parents, raising their children, Mabel, Otis, and Havalah, in God's Word.

Before moving to Ecuador, Luke and Rachel taught English at a WELS-affiliated school in Bogotá, Colombia. They have also served in Milwaukee, Wis., and Sarasota, Fla., where Luke served as a teacher and principal, and Rachel, as a teacher. In their free time, they enjoy spending time as a family, exploring new places, and building relationships with the people God has placed around them. Luke and Rachel are 2010 graduates of Martin Luther College (MLC), New Ulm, Minn.



Thursday – Before You Were Ready

We say it all the time: “I’m not ready.” Not ready to shoulder the responsibility. Not ready to speak. Not ready to make a difference. But Jesus has never waited for people to feel ready. Throughout Scripture, God calls ordinary, uncertain, sometimes very young people. He then equips them for the work he gives them. Which means this: you may not feel ready, but in Christ, you already are.

The theme of this rally is “Christ through us.” The “us” doesn’t mean just pastors, teachers, and staff ministers. It doesn’t mean just adults. “Us” means all of us. Including you. Christ has plans to do things through you that will echo in eternity. This keynote will challenge you to see yourself as someone God is already using—and someone he wants to use even more—to care about friends, to reach the lost, and—yes—to shape the future of the church. Not someday. Not after you “grow up.”

Now. You’re ready.

Jonathan Hein graduated from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis., in 1997 and was called to start a mission congregation in the Charleston, S.C., area. Over the next 20 years, that small group of thirteen souls grew into two congregations serving hundreds of members.

During his years as a pastor in parish ministry, Jonathan also served as chairman of the South Atlantic District Mission Board, where he helped oversee the planting of 14 additional congregations. In 2014, he was called to serve as director of the WELS Commission on Congregational Counseling. In 2017, he transitioned to the WELS Center for Mission and Ministry, where he now oversees the work of all WELS Congregational Services, which help churches and schools assess and plan gospel ministry.

Jonathan is married to Rebecca, a WELS teacher. They have two children: Caleb, who works in finance, and Joshua, who, after six years in the Air Force, is now studying at MLC, New Ulm, Minn., to become a pastor.